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NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS



NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS.

A Novel.

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY.

AUTHOR OF

'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL,'
'MARY ST. JOHN,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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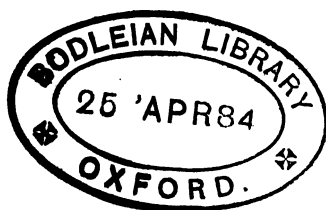
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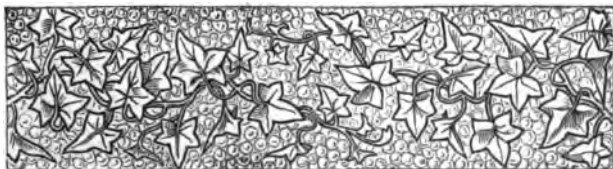




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NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

‘A FRIEND IN NEED.’

HUMAN nature is weak, and we are told there are mixed motives to be found even in the holiest actions. Mr. Drummond never could be brought to acknowledge even to himself the reason why he took so much pains to compose his sermon for that Sunday. Without possessing any special claim to eloquence, he had always been earnest and painstaking, bestowing much labour on the construction and finish of his sentences, which were in consequence more elaborate than original. At times, when he

took less pains and was simpler in style, he seldom failed to satisfy his hearers. His voice was pleasant and well modulated, and his delivery remarkably quiet and free from any tricks of gestures.

But on this occasion his subject baffled him; he wrote and re-wrote whole pages, and then grew discontented with his work. On the Sunday in question he woke with the conviction that something out of the common order of events distinguished the day from other days; but even as this thought crossed his mind he felt ashamed of himself, and was in consequence a little more dictatorial than usual at the breakfast-table.

The inhabitants of Hadleigh were well accustomed to the presence of strangers in their church. In the season there was a regular influx of visitors that filled the lodging-houses to overflowing. Hadleigh had always prided itself on its gentility. As a watering-place it was select and exclusive, only the upper, middle classes, and a sprinkling of the aristocracy, were the habitual frequenters of the little town. It was too quiet; it offered too few attractions to draw

the crowds that flocked to other places. Mr. Drummond's congregation was well used by this time to see new faces in the strangers' pew; nevertheless a little thrill of something like surprise and excitement moved a few of the younger members as Nan and her sisters walked down the aisle, with their mother following them.

'The mother is almost as good-looking as her daughters,' thought Colonel Middleton, as he regarded the group through his gold-mounted eyeglasses; and Miss Middleton looked up for an instant from her prayer-book. Even Mrs. Cheyne roused from the gloomy abstraction which was her usual approach to devotion, and looked long and curiously at the three girlish faces before her. It was refreshing even to her to see anything so fresh and bright-looking.

Nan and her sisters were perfectly oblivious of the sensation they were making. Nan's pretty face was a trifle clouded; the strange surroundings, the sight of all those people unknown to them, instead of the dear, familiar faces that had always been before her, gave the girl a dreary feeling of oppression and

dismay. Her voice quavered audibly as she sang, one or two drops fell on her prayer-book as she essayed to join in the petitions.

‘Why was there not a special clause in the Litany for those who were perplexed and in poverty? It is not only from murder and sudden death one need pray to be delivered,’ thought Nan, with much sinking of heart. Oh, how helpless they were—so young, and only girls, with a great unknown world before them, and Dick away, ignorant of their worst troubles, and too youthful a knight to win his spurs and pledge himself to their service!

Nan’s sweet downcast face drew many eyes in the direction of the great square pew in which they sat. Phillis intercepted some of these looks, as her attention insensibly wandered during the service. It was wrong—terribly wrong, of course; but her thoughts would not concentrate themselves on the lesson the young Vicar was reading in his best style. She was not heavy-hearted like Nan; on the contrary, little thrills of excitement, of impatience, of repressed amusement, pervaded her mind, as she looked at the strange faces round her. ‘They would not

be long strange,' she thought; 'some of them would be her neighbours. What would they say, all these people, when they knew——' and here Phillis held her breath a moment. People were wondering even now who they were. They had dressed themselves that morning, rehearsing their parts, as it were, with studied simplicity. The gown Nan wore was as inexpensive as a gown could be—her hat was a model of neatness and propriety; nevertheless, Phillis groaned in spirit as she glanced at her. Where had she got that style? She looked like a young princess who was playing at Arcadia. Would people ever dare to ask her to work for them? Would they not beg her pardon, and cry shame on themselves for entertaining such a thought for a moment? Phillis almost envied Nan, who was shedding salt tears on her prayer-book. She thought she was absorbed in her devotions, while her own thoughts would wander so sadly; and then a handsome face in the opposite pew attracted her attention. Surely that must be Mrs. Cheyne, who lived in the White House near them, of whom Nan had talked—the poor

woman who had lost husband and children, and who lived in solitary state. The sermon had now commenced, but Phillis turned a deaf ear to the sentences over which Mr. Drummond had expended so much labour; her attention was riveted by the gloomy, beautiful face before her, which alternately attracted and repelled her.

As though disturbed by some magnetic influence, Mrs. Cheyne raised her eyes slowly and looked at Phillis. Something in the girl's keen-eyed glance seemed to move her strangely. The colour crept into her pale face, and her lip quivered; a moment afterwards she drew down her veil and leaned back in her seat, and Phillis, somewhat abashed, endeavoured fruitlessly to gather up the threads of the sermon.

'There, it is over! We have made our *débat*,' she said, a little recklessly, as they walked back to Beach House, where Mrs. Challoner and Dulce were still staying. And as Nan looked at her, a little shocked and mystified by this unusual flippancy, she continued in the same excited way:

'Was it not strange Mr. Drummond choos-

ing that text, "Consider the lilies"? He looked at us; I am sure he did, mother. It was quite a tirade against dress and vanity; but I am sure no one could find fault with us.'

'It was a very good sermon, and I think he seems a very clever young man,' returned Mrs. Challoner, with a sigh, for the service had been a long weariness for her. She had not been unmindful of the attention her girls had caused; but if people only knew—and here the poor lady had clasped her hands and put up petitions that were certainly not in the Litany.

Phillis seemed about to say something, but she checked herself, and they were all a little silent until they reached the house. This first Sunday was an infliction to them all; it was a day of enforced idleness. There was too much time for thought and room for regret. In spite of all Phillis's efforts—and she rattled on cheerily most of the afternoon—Mrs. Challoner got one of her bad headaches, from worry, and withdrew to her room, attended by Dulce, who volunteered to bathe her head and read her to sleep.

The church bells were just ringing for the evening service, and Nan rose, as usual, to put on her hat ; but Phillis stopped her.

‘ Oh, Nan, do not let us go to church again this evening. I am terribly wicked to-day, I know ; but somehow I cannot keep my thoughts in order. So what is the use of making the attempt ? Let us take out our prayer-books and sit on the beach : it is low tide, and a walk over the sands would do us good after our dreadful week.’

‘ If you are sure it would not be wrong,’ hesitated Nan, whose conscience was a little hard to convince in such matters.

‘ No, no. And the run will do Laddie good. The poor little fellow has been shut up in this room all day. We need not tell the mother. She would be shocked, you know. But we never have stayed away from church before, have we ? And to tell you the truth,’ continued Phillis, with an unsteady laugh that betrayed agitation to her sister’s ear, ‘ though I faced it very well this morning, I do not feel inclined to go through it again. People stared so. And I could not help thinking all the time, “ If they only knew ! ”—that was the

thought that kept buzzing in my head. If only Mr. Drummond and all those people knew !'

'What does it matter what people think ?' returned Nan. But she said it languidly. In her heart she was secretly dismayed at this sudden failure of courage. Phillis had been quite bold and merry all the day ; almost reckless in her speeches.

'I am glad we came. This will do us both good,' said Nan gently, as they left the Parade behind them, and went slowly over the shelving beach, with Laddie rolling like a clumsy black ball about their feet. Just before them there was a pretty black-timbered cottage, covered with roses, standing quite low on the shore, and beyond this was nothing but shingly beach, and a stretch of wet, yellow sand, on which the sun was shining. There was a smooth white boulder standing quite alone, on which the girls seated themselves. The tide was still going out ; and the low wash of waves sounded pleasantly in their ears, as they advanced and then receded. A shimmer of silvery light played upon the water, and a rosy tinge began to tint the horizon.

‘How quiet and still it is!’ said Phillis, in an awe-struck voice. ‘When we are tired we must come here to rest ourselves. How prettily those baby waves seem to babble; it is just like the gurgle of baby laughter. And look at Laddie splashing in that pool; he is after that poor little crab. Come here, you rogue!’ but Laddie, intent upon his sport, only cocked his ear restlessly and refused to obey.

‘Yes; it is lovely,’ returned Nan. ‘There is quite a silvery path over the water; by-and-by the sunset clouds will be beautiful. But what is the matter, dear?’ as Phillis sighed and leaned heavily against her; and then, as she turned, she saw the girl’s eyes were wet.

‘Oh, Nan! shall we have strength for it? That is what I keep asking myself to-day. No, you must not look so frightened. I am brave enough generally, and I do not mean to lose pluck; but now and then the thought will come to me, shall we have strength to go through with it?’

‘We must think of each other—that must keep us up,’ returned Nan, whose ready sympathy fully understood her sister’s mood. Only

to Nan would Phillis ever own her failure of courage or fears for the future. But now and then the brave young heart needed comfort, and always found it in Nan's sympathy.

'It was looking at your dear beautiful face that made me feel so suddenly bad this morning,' interrupted Phillis, with a sort of sob. 'It was not the people so much; they only amused and excited me, and I kept thinking, "If they only knew!" But, Nan, when I looked at you—oh! why are you so nice and pretty, if you have got to do this horrid work?'

'I am not a bit nicer than you and Dulce,' laughed Nan, embracing her, for she never could be made to understand that, by most people, she was considered their superior in good looks; the bare idea made her angry. 'It is worse for you, Phillis, because you are so clever, and have so many ideas. But there, we must not go on pitying each other; or else, indeed, we shall undermine our little stock of strength.'

'But don't you feel terribly unhappy sometimes?' persisted Phillis. Neither of them mentioned Dick, and yet he was in both their minds.

‘Perhaps I do,’ returned Nan simply; and then she added, with quaintness that was pathetic, ‘You see, we are so unused to the feeling, and it is over-hard at first; by-and-by we shall be more used to not having our own way in things.’

‘I think I could give up that readily, if I could be sure you and Dulce were not miserable,’ sighed Phillis.

‘That is what I say,’ returned Nan. ‘Don’t you see how simple and beautiful that is? Thinking of each other gives us strength to go through with it all. This evening trying to cheer you up has done me good. I do not feel the least afraid of people to-night. Looking at that sea and sky makes one feel the littleness and unreality of all these worries. What does it matter—what does anything matter—if we only do our duty and love each other, and submit to the Divine Will?’ finished Nan reverently, who seldom spoke of her deeper feelings, even to Phillis.

‘Nan, you are a saint,’ returned Phillis enthusiastically. The worried look had left her eyes; they looked clear and bright as usual.

'Oh, what a heathen I have been to-day ! but, as Dulce is so fond of saying, "I am going to be good." I will read the evening Psalms to you, in token of my resolution, if you like. But wait—is there not some one coming across the sand ? how eerie it looks, such a tall black figure standing between the earth and sky !'

Phillis had good sight or she would hardly have distinguished the figure which was now motionless at such a distance. In another moment she even announced that its draperies showed it to be a woman, before she opened her book and commenced reading.

There is something very striking in a lonely central figure in a scene—the outline cuts so sharply against the horizon. Nan's eyes seemed riveted on it as she listened to Phillis's voice ; it seemed to her as immovable as a Sphinx, its rigidity lending a sort of barrenness and forlornness to the landscape, a black edition of human nature set under a violet and opal sky.

She almost started when it moved, at last, with a steady bearing, as it seemed, towards them ; then curiosity quickened into interest

and she touched Phillis's arm, whispering breathlessly :

‘The Sphinx moves ; look—is not that Mrs. Cheyne, the lady who lives at the White House near us, who always looks so lonely and unhappy ?’

‘Hush !’ returned Phillis, ‘she will hear you ;’ and then Mrs. Cheyne approached with the same swift even walk. She looked at them for a moment, as she passed, with a sort of well-bred surprise in her air, as though she marvelled to see them there ; her black dress touched Laddie, and he caught at it with an impotent bark.

The sisters must have made a pretty picture, as they sat almost clinging together on the stone ; one of Nan's little white hands rested on Laddie's head, the other lay on Phillis's lap. Phillis glanced up from her book, keen-eyed and alert in a moment ; she turned her head to look after the stranger that had excited her interest, and then rose to her feet with a little cry of dismay.

‘Oh, Nan, I am afraid she has hurt herself ! She gave such a slip just now. I wonder what has happened ? She is leaning against

the breakwater, too. Shall we go and ask her if she feels ill or anything ?

'You may go,' was Nan's answer. Nevertheless, she followed Phillis.

Mrs. Cheyne looked up at them a little sharply as they came towards her. Her face was gray, and contracted with pain.

'I have slipped on a wet stone, and my foot has somehow turned under me,' she said quickly, as Phillis ran up to her. 'It was very stupid. I cannot think how it happened; but I have certainly sprained my ankle. It gives me such pain. I cannot move.'

'Oh dear, I am so sorry !' returned Phillis good-naturedly; and, in the most natural manner, she knelt down on the beach, and took the injured foot in her hands. 'Yes, I can feel it is swelling dreadfully; we must try and get your boot off before the attempt gets too painful;' and she commenced unfastening it with deft fingers.

'How am I to walk without my boot?' observed Mrs. Cheyne, a little drily, as she looked down on the girl; but here Nan interposed, in her brisk sensible way:

'You must not walk; you must not think

of such a thing. We will wet our handkerchiefs in the salt water, and bind up your ankle as well as we can ; and then one of us will walk over to the White House for assistance. Your servants could easily obtain a wheeled chair.'

'You knew I lived at the White House, then?' returned Mrs. Cheyne, arching her eyebrows in some surprise ; but she offered no opposition to Nan's plan. The removal of the boot had brought on a sensation of faintness, and she sat perfectly still and quiet while the girls swathed the foot in wet bandages.

'It is a little easier now,' she observed gratefully. 'How neatly you have done it ! you must be used to such work. I am really very much obliged to you both for your kindly help ; and now I am afraid I must trouble you further if I am ever to reach home.'

'I will go at once,' returned Nan cheerfully ; 'but I will leave my sister, for fear you should feel faint again—besides, it is so lonely.'

'Oh, I am used to loneliness !' was the reply, as a bitter expression crossed her face.

Phillis, who was still holding the sprained foot in her lap, looked up in her eager way.

'I think one gets used to everything—that is a merciful dispensation ; but, all the same, I hope you will not send me away. I dearly like to be useful ; and, at present, my object is to prevent your foot coming into contact with these stones. Are you really in less pain now ?—you look dreadfully pale.'

'Oh, that is nothing !' she returned, with a smile so sudden and sweet, that it quite startled Phillis, for it lit up her face like sunshine ; but almost before she caught it, it was gone. 'How good you are to me ; and yet I am a perfect stranger !' and then she added, as though with an after-thought : 'But I saw you in church this morning.'

Phillis nodded ; the question certainly required no answer.

'If I knew you better, I should ask why your eyes questioned me so closely this morning. Do you know, Miss—Miss——' and here she hesitated and smiled, waiting for Phillis to fill up the blank.

'My name is Challoner—Phillis Challoner,' replied Phillis, colouring a little ; and then she added frankly : 'I am afraid you thought me rude, and that I stared at you, but my

thoughts were all topsy-turvy this morning, and refused to be kept in order. One feels curious somehow about the people amongst whom one has come to live.'

'Have you come to live here?' asked Mrs. Cheyne eagerly; and a gleam of pleasure shot into her dark eyes—'you, and your mother, and sisters?'

'Yes; we have just come to the Friary—a little cottage standing on the Braidwood Road.'

Her manner became a little constrained and reserved as she said this; the charming frankness disappeared.

'The Friary!' echoed Mrs. Cheyne; and then she paused for a moment, and her eyes rested searchingly on Phillis. 'That shabby little cottage!' was the thought that filled up the outline of her words; but though she felt inward surprise, and a momentary disappointment, there was no change in the graciousness of her manner. Never before had she so thawed to any one; but the girl's sweet ministry had won her heart. 'Then you will be near me—just at my gates? We shall be close neighbours. I hope you will come and see me, Miss Challoner!'

Poor Phillis ! the blood suddenly rushed over her face at this. How was she to answer without appearing ungracious—and yet at this moment how could she explain ?

'If you please, we are dressmakers.' Oh, no ! such words as these would not get themselves said. It was too abrupt, too sudden, altogether ; she was not prepared for such a thing. Oh, why had she not gone to the White House instead of Nan ? Her officiousness had brought this on her. She could not put the poor foot off her lap, and get up and walk away to cool her hot cheeks.

'Thank you ; you are very good,' she stammered, feeling herself an utter fool : she—Phillis—the clever one.

Mrs. Cheyne seemed rather taken aback by the girl's sudden reserve and embarrassment.

'I suppose you think I should call first, and thank you for your kindness ?' she returned quickly ; 'but I was afraid my foot would keep me too long a prisoner. And, as we are to be neighbours, I hardly thought it necessary to stand on ceremony ; but if you would rather wait——'

‘Oh no,’ replied Phillis, in despair, ‘we will not trouble you to do that! Nan and I will call and ask after your foot, and then we will explain. There is a little difficulty; you might not care to be friends with us if you knew,’ went on Nan, with burning cheeks; ‘but we will call and explain. Oh yes, Nan and I will call!’

‘Do; I shall expect you,’ returned Mrs. Cheyne, half-amused and half-mystified at the girl’s obvious confusion. What did the child mean? They were gentlepeople—one could see that at a glance. They were in reduced circumstances; they had come down to Hadleigh to retrench. Well, what did that matter? People’s wealth or poverty never affected her; she would think none the less well of them for that; she would call at the Friary, and entertain them at the White House with as much pleasure as though they lived in a palace. The little mystery piqued her, and yet excited her interest; it was long since she had interested herself so much in anything. To Miss Middleton she had always been cold and uncertain. Mr. Drummond she treated with a mixture of satire and

haughtiness that aroused his ire. Phillis's frankness and simplicity had won her for a moment to her earlier and better self; she conceived an instantaneous liking for the girl who looked at her with such grave kindly glances. 'I shall expect you, remember,' she repeated, as Nan at that moment appeared in sight.

'Oh yes, Nan and I will come,' returned Phillis slowly, and almost solemnly; but an instant afterwards a flicker of amusement played round her mouth. It was painful, of course; but still, how droll it was!

'How long you have been, Nan!' she exclaimed, a little unreasonably, as Nan ran towards them, flushed and breathless from her haste.

'It has not been long to me,' observed Mrs. Cheyne pointedly. She talked more to Nan than to Phillis after this, until the servants appeared with the wheeled chair; but nevertheless her last words were for Phillis. 'Remember your promise,' was all she said, as she held out her hand to the girl; and Phillis tried to smile in answer, though it was rather a failure after all.



CHAPTER II.

DOROTHY BRINGS IN THE BEST CHINA.

WHAT a fool I made of myself yesterday; but to-day Richard is himself again,' said Phillis, as she gathered up another muslin curtain in her arms ready to hand to Nan, who was mounted on some steps. It was only Monday afternoon, but the girls had done wonders: the work-room, as they called it, was nearly finished; the great carved wardrobe and mahogany table had been polished by Dorothy's strong hands. Mrs. Challoner's easy chair and little work-table at one window looked quite inviting; the sewing-machine and Nan's rosewood davenport were in their places. A hanging cupboard of old china,

and a few well bound books, gave a little colouring and finish, and one or two fine old prints that had hung in the dining-room at Glen Cottage had been disposed with advantage on the newly papered walls. An inlaid clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and some handsome ruby-coloured vases stood on either side of it. Nan was quite right when she had glanced round her a few minutes ago in a satisfied manner, and said no one need be ashamed of living in such a room.

‘Our pretty things make it look almost too nice for the purpose,’ she continued, handling a precious relic, a Sèvres cup and saucer, that had been her especial pride in old days. ‘I think you were wrong, Phil, not to have the china in the other room.’

‘No, indeed; I want people to see it, and be struck with our taste,’ was Phillis’s frank answer. ‘Think what pleasure it will give the poor ladies when their dresses are being tried on. Don’t you remember the basket of wax fruit at Miss Slinders, when we were small children? I thought it the loveliest work of art, and feasted my eyes all the time Miss Slinders was fitting my pink frock. Now,

our pictures and china will refresh people's eyes in the same way.'

Nan smiled and shook her head, as she dusted and arranged her treasures. The china was very dear to her—far more than the books Phillis was arranging on the cheffonier. The Dresden figures that Dick had given to her mother were among them. She did not care for strangers to look at them and appraise their value. They were home treasures—sacred relics of their past. The last time she had dusted them, a certain young man of her acquaintance had walked through the open window whistling 'Blue bonnets over the Border,' and had taken up his station beside her, hindering her work with his chattering. Dulce was in the upper regions unpacking a box in her mother's room. Mrs. Challoner was coming home the next day, and Dorothy and she were hard at work getting things in order.

When Phillis made her downright speech, Nan looked down from her lofty perch, and held out her arms for the curtain.

'Richard is always himself, my dear,' she said softly. 'Do you know when you are

down, Phil, I feel as though we are all at a standstill, and there's no getting on at all ; and then at one of your dear droll speeches the sunshine comes out again, and we are all as right as possible.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' was Phillis's blunt answer ; but she could not help being pleased at the compliment. She looked up archly at Nan, as the mass of soft white drapery lay between them ; and then they both broke into a laugh, just as two shadows seemed to glide past the window, and a moment afterwards the house-bell sounded. 'Visitors—oh, Nan!' and Phillis glanced down at the neat bib apron that she wore over her 'cambric dress.

'Don't be afraid ; Dorothy will have too much sense to admit them,' returned Nan quite indifferently, as she went up a step higher to hang up the curtain.

Phillis was still holding it ; but her manner was not quite so well assured. She thought she heard Dulce's voice in confabulation with the stranger. A moment afterwards Dulce came briskly into the room.

'Nan—Mr. Drummond and his sister have kindly called to see us. We are not in order,

of course. Oh dear!' as Nan looked down on them with startled eyes, not venturing to descend from her perch. 'I ought not to have brought them in here;' looking half mischievously and half guiltily at the young clergyman, who stood hat in hand on the threshold.

'It is I who ought not to have intruded,' he began in a perfect agony of embarrassment, blushing over his face like a girl as Nan looked down at him in much dignity; but Mattie, who was behind him, pushed forward in her usual bustling way.

'Oh, Miss Challoner, it is too bad. I told Archie that we ought not to come too soon—' but Phillis stopped her with an out-stretched hand of welcome.

'What is too bad? I call it very kind and friendly of you both—one hardly expected to find such good neighbours. Nan, if that curtain is finished I think you had better come down. Take care, those steps are rickety—perhaps Mr. Drummond will help you.'

'Let me do the other ones for you. I don't think those steps are safe!' exclaimed Archie, with sudden inspiration.

No one at home would have believed such a thing of him. Mattie's eyes grew quite round and fixed with astonishment at the sight. He had not even shaken hands with Nan, yet there he was, mounted in her place, slipping in the hooks with dexterous hands, while Nan quietly held up the curtain.

Months afterwards the scene came back on Archibald Drummond with a curious thrill half of pain and half of amusement. How had he done it, he wondered. What had made him all at once act in a way so unlike himself?—for, with the best intention, he was always a little stiff and constrained with strangers. Yet there he was laughing as though he had known them all his life, because Nan had rebuked him gravely for slipping two hooks into one ring. Months afterwards he recalled it all: Nan glancing up at him with quietly amused eyes—Phillis standing apart, looking quaint and picturesque in her bib apron—Dulce with the afternoon sunshine lighting up her brown hair; the low old-fashioned room, with the great carved wardrobe, and cupboard of dainty china; the shady little lawn outside, with Laddie

rolling among the daisies. What made it suddenly start up in his memory like a picture one has seen, and never quite forgotten ?

‘Thank you, Mr. Drummond. You have done it so nicely,’ said Nan, with the utmost gravity, as he lingered, almost unwilling to descend to conventionality again. Dulce and Phillis were busily engaged looping up the folds. ‘Now we will ask Dorothy to remove the steps, and then we can sit down comfortably.’

But here Archie interposed.

‘Why need you call anyone ? Tell me where I shall put them.’ Mattie broke into a loud laugh. She could not help it. It was too droll of Archie. She must write and tell Grace.

Archie heard the laugh as he marched out of the room with his burthen, and it provoked him excessively. He made some excuse about admiring Laddie, and went out on the lawn for a few minutes, accompanied by Nan. When they came back the curtains were finished, and the two girls were talking to Mattie. Mattie seemed quite at ease with them.

‘We have such a dear old garden at the Vicarage,’ she was saying, as her brother came into the room. ‘I am not much of a gardener myself, but Archie works for hours at a time. He talks of getting a set of tennis down from town. We think it will help to bring people together. You must promise to come and play sometimes of an afternoon, when you have got the cottage in order.’

‘Thank you,’ returned Phillis; and then Nan and she exchanged looks. A sort of blankness came over the sisters’ faces; a sudden dying out of the brightness and fun.

Mr. Drummond grew a little alarmed.

‘I hope you will not disappoint my sister. She has few friends, and is rather lonely, missing so many sisters; and you are such close neighbours.’

‘Yes; we are close neighbours,’ returned Phillis. But her voice was a little less clear than usual; and to Archie’s astonishment—for they all seemed talking comfortably together—her face had grown suddenly pale. ‘But you must not think us unkind if we refuse your hospitality,’ she went on, looking straight at him, and not at Mattie. ‘But

owing to painful circumstances we have made up our minds that no such pleasures are in store for us. We must learn to do without things, must we not, Nan ?'

'Yes, indeed,' returned Nan very gravely. And then the tears came into Dulce's eyes. Was Phillis actually going to tell them? She would have run away, only she was ashamed of such cowardice.

'I hope you do not mean to do without friends,' stammered Archie. 'That would be too painful to bear.' He thought they were excusing themselves from partaking of their neighbours' hospitality because they were too poor to return it, and wanted to set them at their ease. 'You may have reasons for wishing to be quiet. Perhaps Mrs. Challoner's health and—and—parties are not always desirable,' he went on, floundering a little in his speech, and signing to Mattie to come to his help, which she did at once, breathlessly.

'Parties! Oh dear no! They are such a trouble and expense. But tennis and tea on the lawn is just nothing—nothing at all. One can give a little fruit and some home-made cake. No one need scruple at that.

Archie is not rich—clergymen never are, you know; but he means to entertain his friends as well as he can. I should like you to see Miss Middleton. She is a charming person. And the Colonel is as nice as possible. We will just ask them to meet you in a quiet way, and if your mother is not too much of an invalid, I hope she will give us the pleasure of her company, for when people are such close neighbours it is stupid to stand on ceremony,' finished Mattie, bringing herself rapidly to a full stop.

'You are very kind. But you do not understand,' returned Phillis. And then she stopped, and a gleam of fun came into her eyes. Her sharp ears had caught the rattle of cups and saucers. Actually, that absurd Dorothy was bringing in tea in the old way, making believe that they were entertaining their friends in Glen Cottage fashion. She must get out the truth somehow before the pretty purple china made its appearance. 'Oh,' she went on, with a sort of gulp, as though she felt the sudden touch of cold water, 'you come here meaning kindly, and asking us to your house, and taking com-

passion upon us because we are strangers and lonely, and you do not know that we are poor, and that we have lost our money, and——' but here Mr. Drummond was absolutely rude enough to interrupt her.

'What does that matter, my dear Miss Challoner? Do you think that is of any consequence, in mine or in my sister's eyes? I suppose if I be your clergyman——' and then he stopped and stroked his beard in an embarrassed way; for, though Phillis's face was pale, there was laughter in her eyes.

'Oh! if this be a parochial visit,' she began demurely; 'but you should not have talked of tennis, Mr. Drummond. How do you know we are not Roman Catholics, or Wesleyans, or even Baptists, or Bible Christians? We might have gone to your church out of curiosity on Sunday, or to see the fashions. There is not a Quaker cut about us; but still, we might be Unitarians, and people would not find it out,' continued Phillis, looking with much solemnity at the bewildered young Anglican.

The situation was too absurd; there was no knowing to what length Phillis's reckless-

ness and sense of humour would have brought her, only Nan's good sense came to the rescue.

'Phillis is only in fun, Mr. Drummond. Of course we are Church-people; and of course we hope to attend your services. I am sure my mother will be pleased to see you, when you are kind enough to call. At Oldfield we were always good friends with our clergyman; he was such a dear old man.'

'Do you mean to forbid my sister's visits then?' asked Archie, looking anxiously at her sweet face; Nan looked so pretty, in spite of her discomposure.

'Oh no! we do not mean to be so rude, do we, Phillis? We shall be so glad to see Miss Drummond; but—but,' faltered Nan, losing breath a little, 'we have been unfortunate, and must work for our living; and your sister perhaps would not care to visit dressmakers.'

'What!' exclaimed Archie; he almost jumped out of his chair in his surprise.

Phillis had uttered a faint 'Bravo, Nan!'

but no one heard her. Dulce's cheeks were crimson, and she would not look at anyone; but Nan, who had got out the dreaded word, went on bravely, and was well hugged by Phillis in private afterwards.

'We are not clever enough for governesses,' continued Nan, with a charming smile, addressing Mattie, who sat and stared at her; 'and there was nothing we dreaded so much as to separate; so, as we had capable fingers, and were fond of work, my sister Phillis planned this for us. Now you see, Miss Drummond, why we could not accept your kind hospitality. Whatever we have been, we cannot expect people to visit us now. If you would be good enough to recommend us, and help us in our efforts to make ourselves independent, that is all we can ask of you.'

'Well, I don't know,' returned Mattie bluntly; 'as far as I am concerned, I am never ashamed of any honest calling. What do you say, Archie?'

'I say it is all very proper and laudable,' he returned, hesitating; 'but surely—surely there must be some other way more suitable

to ladies in your position ! Let me call again when your mother comes, and see if there is nothing that I can do or recommend better than this. Yes ; I am sure if I can only talk to your mother, we could find some other way than this.'

'Indeed, Mr. Drummond, you must do nothing of the kind,' replied Phillis, in an alarmed voice ; 'the poor dear mother must not be disturbed by any such talk ! You mean it kindly, but we have made up our own minds—Nan and I : we mean to do without the world, and live in one of our own ; and we mean to carry out our plan in defiance of everything and everybody ; and, though you are our clergyman, and we are bound to listen to your sermons, we cannot take your advice in this.'

'But—but I would willingly act as a friend,' commenced the young man confusedly, looking not at her, but at Nan.

He was so bewildered, so utterly taken aback, he hardly knew what he said.

'Here comes Dorothy with the tea,' interrupted Nan pleasantly, as though dismissing the subject ; 'she has not forgotten our

old customs. Friends always came round us in the afternoon. Mr. Drummond, perhaps you will make yourself useful and cut the cake. Dorothy, you need not have unpacked the best silver teapot.' Nan was moving about in her frank hospitable way. Laddie was whining for cake, and breaking into short barks of impatience. 'This is one of our Glen Cottage cakes. Susan always prides herself on the recipe,' said Nan calmly, as she pressed it on her guests.

Mr. Drummond almost envied his sister as she praised the cake and asked for the recipe. He had always found fault with her manners; but now nothing could be finer than her simplicity. Pure good-nature and innate womanliness was teaching Mattie something better than tact. Nan had dropped a painful subject, and she would not revive it in her brother's presence. There would be plenty of time for her to call, and talk it over with them quietly. Help them!—of course she would help them. They should have her new silk dress that Uncle Conway had just sent her. It was a risk, for perhaps they might spoil it; but such fine creatures

should have a chance. At present she would only enjoy the nice tea, and talk to poor little frightened Dulce, who seemed unable to open her lips after her sister's disclosure.

Archie could not emulate her ease ; a man is always at a disadvantage in such a case. His interest had sustained no shock. It was even stimulated by what he had just heard ; but his sympathy seemed all at once congealed, and he could find no vent for it. In spite of his best efforts his manner grew more and more constrained every moment.

Nan looked at him more than once with reproachful sweetness. She thought they had lost caste in his eyes ; but Phillis, who was shrewd and sharp-set in her wits, read him more truly. She knew—having already met a score of such—how addicted young Englishmen are to *mauvais honte*, and how they will hide acute sensibilities under blunt and stolid exteriors ; and there was a certain softness in Mr. Drummond's eye that belied his stiffness. Most likely he was very sorry for them, and did not know how to show it ; and in this she was right.

Mr. Drummond was very sorry for them ;

but he was still more grieved for himself. The Oxford fellow had not long been a parish priest, and he could not at all understand the position in which he found himself—taking tea with three elegant young dressmakers, who talked the purest English and had decided views on tennis and horticulture. He had just been congratulating himself on securing such companionship for his sister and himself. Being rather classical-minded, he had been calling them the gray-eyed Graces, and one of them at least ‘a daughter of the gods—divinely tall and most divinely fair;’ for where had he seen anything to compare with Nan’s bloom and charming figure? Dressmakers!—oh, if only Grace were at hand that he might talk to her, and gain her opinion how he was to act in such case! Grace had the stiff-necked Drummond pride as well as he, and would hesitate long behind the barriers of conventionality. No wonder, with all these thoughts passing through his mind, that Nan with her bright surface-talk found him a little vague.

It was quite a relief to all the party when Mattie gave the signal for departure, and the

bell was rung for Dorothy to show them out.

‘Well, Nan, what do you think of our visitors?’ asked Phillis, when the garden-door had clanged noisily after them, and she had treated Nan to the aforesaid hugs; ‘for you were so brave, darling, and actually took the wind out of my sails!’ exclaimed the enthusiastic Phillis. ‘Miss Drummond is not so bad after all, is she, in spite of her dowdiness and fussy ways?’

‘No; she means well, and so does her brother. He is very nice, only his self-consciousness spoils him,’ returned Nan in a calm discursive tone, as though they were discussing ordinary visitors.

It was impossible for these young girls to see their ordinary language was not humble enough for their new circumstances. They would make mistakes at every turn like Dorothy, who got out the best china and brewed her tea in the melon-shaped silver teapot.

Phillis opened her eyes rather widely at this. Nan was not often so observant. It was true; self-consciousness was a torment to

Archibald Drummond, a Frankenstein of his own creation, that had grown imperceptibly with his growth to the full measure of his manhood—as inseparable as the shadow from the substance. Phillis had recognised it at once ; but then, as she said, no one was faultless ; and then, he was so handsome. ‘ Very handsome ! ’ chimed in Dulce, whose opinions were full-fledged in such matters.

‘ Is he ? Well, I never cared for a man with a long fair beard,’ observed Nan carelessly. Poor Archie ! how his vanity would have suffered if he had heard her ; for, in a masculine way, he prided himself excessively on the soft silky appendage that Grace had so often praised. A certain boyish countenance, with kindly honest eyes, and a little sandy moustache, was more to Nan’s taste than the handsome young Anglican.

‘ Oh, we all know Nan’s opinion in such matters,’ said Dulce shyly ; and then Nan blushed, and suddenly remembered that Dorothy was waiting for her in the linen-closet, and hurried away, leaving her sisters to discuss their visitors to their hearts’ content.



CHAPTER III.

ARCHIE IS IN A BAD HUMOUR.

‘ H, Archie, I was never more astonished in my life !’ exclaimed Mattie, as she tried to adapt her uneven trot to her brother’s long swinging footsteps ; and then she glanced up in his face to read his mood : but Archie’s features were inscrutable, and presented an appalling blank. In his mind he was beginning his letter to Grace, and wondering what he should say to her about their new neighbours. ‘ Writing is such a nuisance when one wants to talk to a person,’ he thought irritably. ‘ Oh, Archie, won’t you tell me what we are to do ?’ went on Mattie excitedly. She would not take Archie’s silence as a hint that

he wanted to keep his thoughts to himself. 'Those poor girls! oh, how nice and pretty they all are, especially the eldest! and is not the youngest—Dulce, I think they called her—the very image of Isabel?'

'Isabel! not a bit! That is so like you, Mattie. You always see likenesses when other people cannot trace the faintest resemblance,' for this remark was sure to draw out his opposition. Isabel was a silly flirting little thing in her brother's estimation, and, he thought, could not hold a candle to the youngest Miss Challoner.

'Oh dear! now I have made you cross!' sighed poor Mattie, who especially wanted to keep him in good-humour. 'And yet everyone but you thinks Isabel so pretty. I am sure, from what Grace said in her last letter, that Mr. Ellis Burton means to propose to her.'

'And I suppose you will all consider that a catch,' sneered Archie; 'that is so like a parcel of women, thinking every man who comes to the house and makes a few smooth-tongued speeches—is, in fact, civil—must be after a girl. Of course you have all helped

to instil this nonsense into the child's head.'

'Dear me, how you talk, Archie!' returned Mattie, feeling herself snubbed as usual. Why, Archie had been quite excited about it only the other day, and had said quite seriously that with seven girls in a family it would be a great blessing if Isabel could make such a match; for it was very unlikely that Laura and Susie, or even Clara, would do much for themselves in that way, unless they decidedly improved in looks.

'Well, it is nothing to do with me,' he returned, in a chilling manner; 'we all know our own mind best. If an angular lanthorn-jawed fellow like Burton, who by-the-bye does not speak the best English, is to Isabel's taste, let her have him by all means: he is well-to-do, and I dare say will keep a carriage for her by-and-by—that is what you women think a great advantage,' finished Archie, who certainly seemed bent on making himself disagreeable.

Mattie heaved another great sigh, but she did not dare to contradict him. Grace would have punished him on the spot by a

dose of satire that would have brought him to reason and good-nature in a moment; but Mattie ventured only on those laborious sighs which she jerked up from the bottom of her honest little heart.

Archie heard the sigh, and felt ashamed of his bad temper. He did not know himself why he felt so suddenly cross; some secret irritation was at work within him, and he could scarcely refrain from bidding Mattie quite roughly to hold her tongue and not tease him with her chatter. If she expected him in his present state of mind, which was at once contradictory and aggressive, to talk to her about the Challoners, she must just make up her mind to be disappointed, for he could not bring himself to speak of them to her just now: he wanted to hold counsel with his own thoughts and with Grace. He would call at the Friary again and see Mrs. Challoner, and find out more of this strange matter; but as to talking it over with Mattie, he quite shrugged his shoulders as he swung open the green door.

‘Are you going in?’ faltered Mattie, as she noticed this movement.

‘ Well, yes ; I have letters to write, and it is too hot for a longer walk,’ he returned decidedly ; and then, as Mattie stood hesitating and wistful in the middle of the road, he strode off, leaving the door to close noisily after him, and not caring to inquire her further movements, such being the occasional graceless manners of brothers when sisterly friendship is not to their liking.

Mattie felt herself snubbed ; but for the first time in her life she did not take her snubbing meekly. It was too much to expect of her, who was only a woman and not one of Archie’s divinities, that she should follow him into the house and hold her tongue just because he was pleased to refrain from speaking. Water must find its vent ; and Mattie’s tongue could not be silenced in this way. If Archie would not talk to her, Miss Middleton would ; so at once she trotted off for Brooklyn, thereby incurring Archie’s wrath if he could only have known her purpose ; for gossip was to him as the sin of witchcraft, unless he stooped to it himself, and then it was amiable sociability.

Miss Middleton was listening to her father’s

reading as usual, but she welcomed Mattie with open arms, literally as well as metaphorically, for she kissed Mattie on either cheek, and then scolded her tenderly for looking so flushed and tired; 'for somebody who is always looking after other people, and never has time to spare for herself, is growing quite thin—is she not, father? and we must write to Grace if this goes on,' finished Miss Middleton with one of her kind looks.

All this was cordial to poor Mattie, who, though she was used to snubbing—and took as kindly to it as a spaniel to water—yet felt herself growing rather like a thread-paper and shabby with everyday worries, and never an encouraging word to inspirit her on.

So she gave Elizabeth a misty little smile—Mattie's smile was pretty, though her features were ordinary—and then sat up straight and began to enjoy herself, that is, to talk; never noticing that Colonel Middleton looked at his paper in a crest-fallen manner, not much liking the interruption and the cessation of his own voice.

‘Oh dear!’ began Mattie; she generally prefaced her remarks by an ‘Oh dear!’ (‘That was one of her jerky ways,’ as Archie said.) ‘I could not help coming straight to you, for Archie would not talk, and I felt I must tell somebody. Oh dear, Miss Middleton! What do you think? We have just called at the Friary—and——’ but here Colonel Middleton’s countenance relaxed, and he dropped his paper.

‘Those young ladies, eh? Come, Elizabeth, this is interesting. Well, what sort of place is the Friary—seen from the inside, eh, Miss Drummond?’

‘Oh, it is very nice,’ returned Mattie enthusiastically. ‘We were shown into such a pretty room, looking out on the garden. They have so many nice things—pictures and old china, and handsomely bound books, and all arranged so tastefully. And before we went away, the old servant—she seems really quite a superior person—brought in an elegant little tea-tray; the cups and saucers were handsomer even than yours, Miss Middleton, dark-purple and gold. Just what I admire so——’

‘Ah, reduced in circumstances! I told you so, Elizabeth,’ ejaculated the Colonel.

‘I never saw Archie enjoy himself so much or seem so thoroughly at home anywhere. Somehow the girls put us so at our ease. Though they were hanging up curtains when we went in—and anyone else would have been annoyed at our intruding so soon—actually before we were in the room a moment, Archie was on the steps, helping the eldest Miss Challoner fasten the hooks.’

Miss Middleton exchanged an amused look with her father. Mattie’s narrative was decidedly interesting.

‘Oh, don’t tell him I repeated that, for he is always calling me chatterbox!’ implored Mattie, who feared she had been indiscreet, and that the Colonel was not to be trusted, which was quite true as far as jokes were concerned. No one understood the art of teasing better than he, and the young vicar had already had a taste of his kindly satire. ‘Archie only meant to be good-natured and put everyone at their ease.’

‘Quite right. Mr. Drummond is always kind,’ returned Elizabeth benignly. She had

forgotten Mattie's frequent scoldings, and the poor little thing's tired face, or she would never have hazarded such a compromise with truth. But somehow Elizabeth always forgot people's weaknesses, especially when they were absent. It was so nice and easy to praise people; and if she always believed what she said, that was because her faith was so strong, and charity that is love was her second nature.

'Oh yes, of course,' returned Mattie innocently. She was far too loyal a little soul to doubt Archie's kindness for a moment. Was he not the pride and ornament of the family—the domestic Pope, who issued his Bulls without possibility of contradiction? Whatever Archie did must be right. Was not that their domestic creed? A little slavish, perhaps, but still so exquisitely feminine. Mattie was of opinion that—well, to put a mild term—irritability was a necessary adjunct of manhood. All men were cross sometimes. It behoved their womankind, then, to throw oil on the troubled waters—to speak peaceably, and to refrain from sour looks, or even the shadow of a frown. Archie was never cross with Grace, therefore it must

be she, Mattie, on whom the blame lay. She was such a silly little thing, and so on. There is no need to follow the self-accusation of one of the kindest hearts that ever beat.

‘Did not your visit end as pleasantly as it began?’ asked Elizabeth, who, though she was over-merciful in her judgments, was not without a good deal of sagacity and shrewdness. Something lay beyond the margin of Mattie’s words. She could see that plainly; and then her father was getting impatient.

‘Well, you see, that spoiled everything,’ returned Mattie, jumbling her narrative in the oddest manner. ‘Archie was so sorry, and so was I; and he got quite—you know his way when he feels uncomfortable. I thought Miss Challoner was joking at first—that it was just a bit of make-believe fun, until I saw how grave Miss Phillis, that is the second one, looked; and then the little one—at least, she is not little, but somehow one fancies she is—seemed as though she were going to cry.’

‘But what did Miss Challoner say to distress you and Mr. Drummond so?’ asked

Elizabeth, trying patiently to elicit facts and not vague statements from Mattie.

‘Oh, she said—no, please don’t think I am exaggerating, for it is all true—that they had lost their money, and were very poor, and that she and her sisters were dress-makers.’

‘Dressmakers!’ shouted the Colonel, and his ruddy face grew almost purple with the shock; his very moustache seemed to bristle. ‘Dressmakers! my dear Miss Drummond, I don’t believe a word of it! Those girls! It is a hoax—a bit of nonsense from beginning to end!’

‘Hush, father! you are putting Mattie out,’ returned Elizabeth mildly. It was one of her idiosyncrasies to call people as soon as possible by their Christian names, though no one but her father and brother ever called her Elizabeth. Perhaps her gray hair, and a certain soft dignity that belonged to her, forbade such freedom. ‘Dear father, we must let Mattie speak.’ But even Elizabeth let her work lie unheeded in her lap in the engrossing interest of the subject.

‘I do not mean they have been dress-

makers all this time, but this is their plan for the future. Miss Challoner said they were not clever enough for governesses, and that they did not want to separate. But that is what they mean to do—to make dresses for people who are not half so good as themselves.'

'Preposterous! absurd!' groaned the Colonel. 'Where is their mother? What can the old lady be thinking about?' Mrs. Challoner was not an old lady by any means; but then the choleric Colonel had never seen her, or he would not have applied that term to the aristocratic-looking gentlewoman whom Mattie had admired in Miss Milner's shop.

'I had a good look round the room afterwards,' went on Mattie, letting this pass. 'They had got a great carved wardrobe—I thought that funny in a sitting-room; but of course it was for the dresses'—another groan from the Colonel—'and there was a sewing-machine, and a rosewood davenport for accounts, and a chiffonnier of course for the pieces. Oh, they mean business; and I should not be surprised if they understand their work well,' went on Mattie, warming up

to her subject, and thinking of the breadths of green silk that reposed so snugly between silver paper in her drawers at the Vicarage—the first silk dress she had ever owned, for the Drummond finances did not allow of such luxuries. The new colour, too : such a soft, invisible, shadowy green—like an autumn leaf shrivelled by the sun's richness. ' Oh, if they should spoil it ! ' thought Mattie, with a sigh, as the magnitude of her intended sacrifice weighed heavily upon her mind.

' It is sheer girlish nonsense—I might say foolery ; and the mother must be a perfect idiot ! ' began the Colonel angrily.

He was an excitable man ; and his wrath at the intelligence was really very great. He had taken a fancy to the new-comers, and was prepared to welcome them heartily in his genial way ; but now his old-fashioned prejudices were grievously wounded. It was against his nice code of honour that women should do anything out of the usual beaten groove—innovations that would make them conspicuous were heinous sins in his eyes.

' Come, Mattie, you and I will have a chat about this by ourselves,' observed Elizabeth

cheerfully, as she noticed her father's vexation. He would soon cool down if left to himself; she knew that well. 'Suppose we go down to Miss Milner, and hear what she has to say; you may depend upon it that it was this that made her so reserved with us the other day?'

'Oh! do you think so?' exclaimed Mattie; but she was charmed at the idea of fresh gossip. And then they set off together.

Miss Milner seemed a little surprised to see them so soon, for Mattie had already paid her a visit that day; but, at Miss Middleton's first words, a look of annoyance passed over her good-natured face.

'Dear, dear! to think of that leaking out already!' she said, in a vexed voice; 'and I have not spoken to a soul, because the young ladies asked me to keep their secret a few days longer. "You must give us till next Monday," one of them said this very morning; "by that time we shall be in order, and then we can set to work."' '

'It was Miss Challoner who told me herself,' observed Mattie, in a deprecating manner. 'My brother and I called this

afternoon ; you see, being the clergyman, and such close neighbours, he thought we might be of some use to the poor things.'

'Poor things indeed !' ejaculated Miss Milner. 'I cannot tell you how bad I felt,' she went on, with her little grey curls bobbing over her high cheek-bones with every word, 'when that dear young lady put down her head there'—pointing to a spot about as big as half-a-crown on the wooden counter—'and cried like a baby. "Oh, how silly I am!" she said, sobbing-like ; "and what would my sisters say to me ? But you are so kind, Miss Milner ; and it does seem all so strange and horrid." I made up my mind, then and there,' finished the good woman solemnly, 'that I would help them to the best of my powers. I have got their bits of advertisements to put about the shop ; and there's my new black silk dress, that has laid by since Christmas, because I knew Miss Slasher would spoil it—not but what they may ruin it finely for me ; but I mean to shut my eyes and take the risk,' with a little smile of satisfaction over her own magnanimity.

Elizabeth stretched out her hand across the counter.

‘Miss Milner, you are a good creature,’ she said softly; ‘I honour you for this. If people always helped each other and thought so little of a sacrifice, the world would be a happier place;’ and then, without waiting for a reply from the gratified shopwoman, she went out of the library with a thoughtful brow.

‘Miss Milner has read me a lesson,’ she said by-and-by, when Mattie had marvelled at her silence a little. ‘Conventionality makes cowards of the best of us. I am not particularly worldly-minded,’ she went on, with a faint smile, ‘but all the same I must plead guilty to feeling a little shocked myself at your news; but when I have thought a little more about it, I dare say I shall see things by a truer light, and be as ready to admire these girls as I am now to wonder at them;’ and after this she bid Mattie a kindly good-bye.

Meanwhile Phillis was bracing herself to undergo another ordeal. Mr. Drummond and his sister had only just left the cottage when

a footman from the White House brought a note for her. It was from Mrs. Cheyne, and was worded in a most friendly manner.

She thanked the sisters gracefully for their timely help on the previous evening, and, though making light of her accident, owned that it would keep her a prisoner to her sofa for a few days; and then she begged them to waive ceremony, and come to her for an hour or two that evening.

‘I will not ask you to dinner, because that will perhaps inconvenience you, as you must be tired or busy,’ she wrote; ‘but if one or both of you would just put on your hats and walk up in the cool of the evening to keep Miss Mewlstone and myself company, it would be a real boon to us both,’ and then she signed herself ‘Magdalene Cheyne.’

Phillis wore a perplexed look on her face as she took the note to Nan, who was still in the linen-closet.

‘Very kind — very friendly,’ commented Nan, when she had finished reading it; ‘but I could not possibly go, Phil. As soon as I have done this I have promised to sit with mother. She has been alone all day. You

could easily send an excuse, for Mrs. Cheyne must know we are busy.'

'I don't feel as though an excuse will help us here,' returned Phillis slowly; 'when an unpleasant thing has to be done, it is as well to get it over—thinking about it only hinders one's sleep.'

'But you will surely not go alone!' demanded Nan, in astonishment. 'You are so tired, Phil—you have been working hard all day. Give it up, dear, and sit and rest in the garden a little.'

'Oh no,' returned Phillis disconsolately. 'I value my night's rest too much to imperil it so lightly; besides, I owe it to myself for a penance for being such a coward this afternoon.' And then, without waiting for any further dissuasion, she carried off the letter and wrote a very civil but vague reply, promising to walk up in the evening and inquire after the invalid; and then she dismissed the messenger, and went up to her room with a heavy heart.

Dulce came to help her like a dutiful sister, and chattered on without intermission.

‘I suppose you will put on your best dress?’ she asked, as she dived down into the recesses of a big box.

Phillis, who was sitting wearily on the edge of her bed, roused up at this.

‘My best blue silk and cashmere that we wore last at Fitzroy Lodge? Dulce, how can you be so absurd! Anything will do—the gray stuff or the old foulard. No, stop—I forgot—the gray dress is better made and newer in cut. We must think of that. Oh, what a worry it is going out when one is tired to death!’ she continued, with unusual irritation.

Dulce respected her sister’s mood, and held her peace, though she knew the gray dress was the least becoming to Phillis, who was pale, and wanted a little colour to give her brightness.

‘There now, you look quite nice,’ she said in a patronizing voice, as Phillis put on her hat and took her gloves. Phillis nodded her thanks rather sadly, and then bethought herself and came back and kissed her.

‘Thank you, dear Dulce, I am not nearly

so tired now ; but it is getting late, and I must run off ;' and so she did until she had turned the corner, and then in spite of herself her steps became slower and more lagging.





CHAPTER IV.

‘YOU ARE ROMANTIC.’

HUMAN nature is prone to argument ; a person will often in the course of a few moments bring himself or herself to the bar of conscience, accuse, excuse, and sum up the case in the twinkling of an eye.

On arriving at the lodge-gates Phillis began to take herself to task. Conscience, that ‘makes cowards of us all,’ began its small inner remonstrance ; then followed self-flagellation and much belabouring of herself with many remorseful terms. She was a pitiful thing compared to Nan ; she was conventional—there were no limits to her pride. Where was that freedom and nobility of soul

which she once fancied would sweep over worldly prejudices and carry her into purer air. She was still choking in the fogs of mere earthly exhalations; no wonder Nan was a little disappointed in her, though she was far too kind to say so—well, she was disappointed in herself.

By this time she had reached the hall-door; and now she began to hold up her head more boldly, and look about her; when a very solemn-looking butler confronted her, she said to herself, 'It will be all the same a hundred years hence, and I am determined this time not to be beaten;' and then she asked for Mrs. Cheyne with something of her old sprightliness, and nothing could exceed the graceful ease of her entrance.

All the Challoners walked well. There was a purity of health about them that made them delight in movement and every bodily exercise; an elasticity of gait that somehow attracted attention.

No girls danced better than they. And when they had the chance, which was seldom, they could ride splendidly. Their skating was a joy to see, and made one wish that the

ice would last for ever, that one could watch such light, skimming practice; and as for tennis, no other girl had a chance of being chosen for a partner unless the Challoners good-naturedly held aloof, which ten times out of twelve they were sure to do.

Phillis, who, from her pale complexion, was supposed to possess the least vitality, delighted in exercise for its own sake. 'It is a pleasure only to be alive and to know it,' was a favourite speech with her on summer mornings, when the shadows were blowing lightly hither and thither, and the birds had so much to say that it took them until evening to finish saying it.

Mrs. Cheyne, who was lying on her couch, watched with admiring eyes the girl's straightforward walk—so alert and businesslike—so free from fuss and consciousness, and held out her hand with a more cordial welcome than she was accustomed to show her visitors.

It was a long room. And as the summer dusk was falling; and there was only a shaded lamp beside Mrs. Cheyne, it was full of dim corners. Nevertheless, Phillis piloted herself without hesitation to the illuminated circle.

‘This is good of you, Miss Challoner, to take me at my word. But where is your sister? I wanted to look at her again, for it is long since I have seen anyone so pretty. Miss Mewlstone, this is the good Samaritan who bound up my foot so cleverly.’

‘Ah ; just so,’ returned Miss Mewlstone. And a soft, plump hand touched Phillis’s, and then she went on picking up stitches and taking no further notice.

‘Nan could not come,’ observed Phillis. ‘She had to run down to Beach House to report progress to mother. We hope she is coming home to-morrow. But as you were so kind as to write, I thought I would just call and inquire about your foot. And then it would be easier to explain things than to write about it.’

‘Oh, so your mother is coming home!’ returned Mrs. Cheyne, with so much interest in her voice that Miss Mewlstone left off counting to look at her. (‘Just so, just so,’ Phillis heard her mutter.) ‘You must have worked hard to get ready for her so soon. When my foot will allow me to cross a room without hobbling I will do myself the pleasure

of calling on her. But that will not be yet ; neither this week nor the next, I am afraid. But I shall see a good deal of you and your sister before then,' concluded Mrs. Cheyne, with the graciousness of one who knows she is conferring an unusual honour.

'I do not know,' faltered Phillis. And then she sat upright, and looked her hostess full in the face. 'That will be for you to decide when you hear what I have to say. But I fear'—with a very poor attempt at a smile—'that we shall see very little of each other in the future.'

'Oh, there is a mystery, is there ?' returned Mrs. Cheyne, with a little scorn in her manner ; and her mouth took one of the downward curves that Mr. Drummond so thoroughly disliked. She had taken an odd fancy to these girls, especially to Phillis, and had thought about them a good deal during a sleepless, uneasy night. Their simplicity, their straightforward unconsciousness, had attracted her in spite of her cynicism. But at the first suspicion of mystery she withdrew into herself rather haughtily. 'Do speak out, I beg, Miss Challoner ; for if there be one thing

that makes me impatient, it is to have anything implied.'

'I am quite of your opinion,' replied Phillis, with equal haughtiness; only it sat more strangely on her girlishness. 'That is why I am here to-night—just to inquire after your foot and explain things.'

'Well!' still more impatiently, for this woman was a spoiled child and hated to be thwarted, and was undisciplined and imperious enough to ruin all her own chances of happiness.

'I told you that we were very poor,' went on Phillis, in a sweet and steady voice; 'but that did not seem to impress you much, and I thought how noble that was'—catching her breath an instant—'but it will make a difference and shock you dreadfully, as it did Mr. Drummond, when I tell you we are dressmakers—Nan and Dulce and I—at least that will be our future occupation.'

'Ah, just so!' ejaculated Miss Mewlstone; but she said it with her lips far apart, and a mistiness came into her sleepy blue eyes. Perhaps, though she was stout and middle-aged and breathed a little too heavily at

times, she remembered—long ago when she was young and poor, and had to wage a bitter war with the world—when she ate the dry bread and drank the bitter water of dependence, and felt herself ill-nourished by such unpalatable sustenance. 'Oh, just so, poor thing!' and a little round tear dripped on to the ball of scarlet fleecy wool.

But Mrs. Cheyne listened to the announcement in far different mood. There was an incredulous stare at Phillis, as though she suspected her of a joke; and then she laughed a dry, harsh laugh that was not quite pleasant to hear.

'Oh, this is droll, passing droll!' she said, and leaned back on her cushions, and drew her Indian cashmere round her, and frowned a little.

'I am glad you find it so,' returned Phillis, who was nonplussed at this, and did not know what to say, and was a little angry in consequence; and then she got up from her chair with a demonstration of spirit. 'I am glad you find it so; but to us it is sad earnestness!'

'What! are you going?' asked Mrs. Cheyne, with a keen glance through her

half-shut eyes at poor Phillis standing so tall and straight before her. 'And you have not told me the reason for taking so strange a step!'

'The reason lies in our poverty and paucity of resources,' was Phillis's curt reply.

'It is not to make a sensation, then? no, I did not mean that,' as Phillis shot an indignant glance at her—'not exactly; but there is no knowing what the emancipated girl will do. Of course, I have no right to question, who was a stranger to you four-and-twenty hours ago, and had never heard the name of Challoner, except that it was a good and an old name; but when one sees young things like you about to forfeit caste, and build up a barrier between yourselves and your equals that the bravest will fear to pass, it seems as though one must lift up one's voice in protest.'

'Thank you; but it will be no use,' returned Phillis coldly.

'You are determined to make other people's dresses?' and here her lip curled a little, perhaps involuntarily.

'We must make dresses or starve; for our

fingers are cleverer than our brains,' replied Phillis defiantly ; for she knew nothing about it, and her powers were so immature and unfledged that she had never tried her wings, and had no notion whether she could fly or not, and yet no girl had a clearer head. 'We have chosen work that we know we can do well, and we mean not to be ashamed of our occupation. In the old days ladies used to spin and weave, and no one blamed them, though they were noble ; and if my work will bring me money, and keep the mother comfortable, I see nothing that will prevent my doing it.'

'Ah, you are romantic, Miss Challoner ; you will soon be taught matter-of-fact !'

'I am willing to learn anything, but I must choose my teachers,' retorted Phillis, with a little heat, for the word 'romantic' and the satirical droop of Mrs. Cheyne's lip made her decidedly cross. 'But I must not detain you any more with our uninteresting affairs,' dropping a little curtsey, half in pique and half in mockery, for her spirits were rising under this rough treatment.

'It is far from uninteresting ; I have not

heard anything so exciting for a long time. Well, perhaps you had better go before I say anything very rude, for I am terribly outspoken, and I think you are all silly self-willed young people ;' then, as Phillis bridled her neck like an untamed colt, she caught hold of the girl's dress to detain her, and the sharpness passed out of her eyes. 'Now don't go away and believe that I think any worse of you for telling me this. I am a cross-grained body, and contradiction makes me worse. I don't know how I shall act ; I must have time to consider this extraordinary bit of news. But all the same, whatever I do, whether I know you or do not know you, I shall always think you the very bravest girl I ever saw ;' and then she let her go, and Phillis, with her head in the air and her thoughts all topsy-turvy, marched out of the room.

But when she reached the end of the corridor there was a soft but distinctly audible breathing behind her, and, as in Mr. Drummond's case, Miss Mewlstone's shadowy gray gown swept between her and the door.

'Miss Mewlstone, how you startled me ! but the carpets are so soft and thick !'

'Yes, indeed ! Just so, my dear ; but Phillips must be asleep, as he does not answer the bell, and so I thought I would let you out. You are young to walk alone ; shall I throw a shawl over my cap, and walk down the road with you ?'

'Not for worlds, my dear Miss Mewlstone ;' but Phillis was quite touched at this unexpected kindness. Miss Mewlstone did not look sleepy now ; her small blue eyes were wide open, and her round placid face wore a most kindly expression, and there was a tremulous movement of her hands, as though they were feeling after something. 'It is only such a little bit of road ; and, though the trees make it dark, I am not the least afraid of going alone.'

'Ah ! just so. When we are young, we are brave ; it is the old who are afraid of the grasshopper. I like your spirit, my dear—and so does she, though she is a little taken aback and disappointed ; but anything that interests and rouses her is welcome. Even this may do her good ; for it will give her

something to think about besides her own troubles.'

'I have heard of her troubles——' began Phillis; but a moving door arrested Miss Mewlstone's attention, and she interrupted her hurriedly.

'Ah! there is Phillips at last. Just so; you shall hear from me again. It is a gray satin—one of her presents; but I have never had it made up; for what is the use, when we keep no company?' went on Miss Mewlstone incoherently. 'Oh! is that you, Phillips? Please go with this young lady to the lodge-gate.—You shall make it after your own fashion,' she whispered in Phillis's ear; 'and I am not as particular as other people. There is Magdalene now. Ah! just so. Good-night, my dear; and mind the scraper by the gate.'

Phillis was almost sorry when the obsequious Phillips left her; for the road certainly looked terribly dark. There was no moon, and the stars chose to be invisible; and there was a hot thundery feeling in the air that suggested a storm. And she moved aside with a slight sensation of uneasiness—not fear, of

course not fear—as a tall, gloomy-looking figure bore swiftly down on her; for, even if a girl be ever so brave, a very tall man walking fast on a dark night with a slouching hat like a conspirator's is rather a terrifying object; and how could she know that it was only Archie Drummond in his old garden-hat, taking a constitutional?

But he brought himself up in front of her with a sudden jerk.

'Miss Challoner—alone at this time of night!'

'Why, it is not ten; and I could not wait for Dorothy to fetch me!' returned Phillis, bound to defend herself, and quite palpitating with relief; not that she was afraid—not a bit of it!—but still, Mr. Drummond's presence was very welcome.

'I suppose I shall do as well as Dorothy?' he returned, veering round with the greatest ease, just as though he were Dick, and bound to escort a Challoner. 'Challoners' Squire,' that was his name amongst people.

'Oh, poor Dick!' thought Phillis, with a sudden rush of tenderness for her old play-

mate; and then she said demurely, but with a spice of malice:

‘Thank you, Mr. Drummond. The road is so gloomy that I shall be glad of your escort this evening; but we shall have to do without that sort of thing now, for our business may often bring us out after dark, and we must learn not to be too particular.’

‘Oh, this must not be!’ he returned decidedly; and, though it was too dark to see his face, she knew by his voice that he was dreadfully shocked. ‘I must see your mother, and talk to her about this; for it would never do for you to run such risks. I could not allow it for a moment; and, as your clergyman’—coming down from his high horse, and stammering a little—‘I have surely—surely a right——’ but Phillis snapped him up in a moment, and pretty sharply too, for she had no notion of a young man giving himself airs and lecturing her.

‘Oh, no right at all!’ she assured him; ‘clergymen could only rebuke evil-doers, to which class she and her sisters did not belong, thank heaven!’ to which Mr. Drummond devoutly said an ‘amen.’ ‘And would he

please tell her if dressmakers were always met two-and-two, like the animals in the ark? and how would it sound when she or Nan had been fitting on a dress, on a winter's evening, if they were to refuse to leave the house until Dorothy fetched them? and how——' but here Mr. Drummond checked her, and the darkness hid his smile.

'Now you are beyond me, Miss Challoner. In a matter of detail, a man, even a parson, is often at fault. Is there no other way of managing this odious business? Forgive me; the word slipped out by accident! Could you not do the fitting, or whatever you call it, by daylight, and stay at home quietly in the evening like other young ladies?'

'Of course not,' returned Phillis promptly. She had not the least idea why it could not be done; indeed, if she had been perfectly cool—which she was not, for Mrs. Cheyne had decidedly stroked her the wrong way and ruffled her past endurance—she would have appreciated the temperate counsel vouchsafed her, and acquiesced in it without a murmur; but now she seemed bent on contradiction.

‘Our opinions seem to clash to-night,’ returned Mr. Drummond good-humouredly, but feeling that the young lady beside him had decidedly a will of her own. ‘She is very nice, but she is not as gentle as her sister,’ he said to himself; which was hard on Phillis, who, though she was not meek, being a girl of spirit, was wholesomely sweet and sound to the heart’s core.

‘One may be supposed to know one’s business best,’ she replied rather drily to this. And then, fearing that she might seem ungracious to a stranger, who did not know her and her little ways, she went on in a more cordial tone. ‘I am afraid you think me a little cross to-night; but I have been having a stand-up fight, and am rather tired. Trying to battle against other people’s prejudices makes one irritable. And then, because I am down and out of heart about things, our clergyman thinks fit to lecture me on propriety.’

‘Only for your good. You must forgive me if I have taken too much upon myself,’ returned Mr. Drummond, with much compunction. ‘You seem so lonely. No father

or brother—at least—pardon me, I believe you have no brother?’

‘Oh, no; we have no brother,’ sighed Phillis. Their acquaintance was in too early a stage to warrant her in bringing in Dick’s name. Besides, that sort of heterogeneous relationship is so easily misconstrued. And then she added, ‘I see. You meant to be very kind, and I was very ungrateful.’

‘I only wish I could find some way of helping you all,’ was his reply to this. But it was said with such frank kindness that Phillis’s brief haughtiness vanished. They were standing at the gate of the Friary by this time; but Mr. Drummond still lingered. It was Phillis who dismissed him.

‘Good-night, and many thanks,’ she said brightly. ‘It is too late to ask you in, for you see, even dressmakers have their notion of propriety.’ And as she uttered this malicious little speech, the young man broke into a laugh that was heard by Dorothy in her little kitchen.

‘Oh, that is too bad of you, Miss Chalonier,’ he said, as soon as he recovered him-

self; but, nevertheless, he liked the girl better for her little joke.

Mr. Drummond's constitutional had lasted so long that Mattie grew quite frightened, and came down in her drab dressing-gown to wait for him. It was not a becoming costume, though it was warm and comfortable; but then Mattie never considered what became her. If anyone had admired her, or cared how she looked or what she wore, or had taken an interest in her for her own sake, she would doubtless have developed an honest liking for pretty things. But what did it matter under the present circumstances? Mr. Drummond was lighting his chamber-candle when Mattie rushed out on him—a grotesque little figure, all capes and frills.

‘Oh, Archie, how you frightened me! Where have you been?’

Archie shrugged his shoulders at this.

‘I am not aware, Matilda’—for in severe moods he would call her by her full name, a thing she specially disliked from him—‘I did not know before that I was accountable to you for my actions. Neither am I particularly obliged to you for spying upon me in this

way.' For the sight of Mattie at this time of night was peculiarly distasteful. Why was he to be watched in his own house ?

'Oh dear, Archie ! How can you say such things ? Spy on you, indeed ; when there is a storm coming up, and I was so anxious.'

'I am very much obliged to you,' returned Archie ironically ; 'but as you see I am safe, don't you think you had better take off that thing'—pointing to the obnoxious garment—'and go to bed ?' And such was his tone that poor Mattie fled without a word, and cried a little in her dark room, because Archie would not be kind to her and let her love him, but was always finding fault with one trifle or other. To-night it was her poor old dressing-gown, which had been her mother's, and had been considered good enough for Mattie. And then he had called her a spy. And here she gave a sob that caught Archie's ears as he passed her door.

'Good-night, you little goose !' he called out, for the sound made him uncomfortable ; and though the words were contemptuous, the voice was not, and Mattie at once dried her eyes and was comforted.

But before Archie went to sleep that night, he made up his mind that it was his duty as a clergyman and a Christian to look over Phillis's wilfulness, and to befriend to the utmost of his power the strangers, widow and fatherless, that Providence had placed at his very gates.

'They are so very lonely, poor things!' he said to himself; 'not a man about them. By-the-bye, I noticed she did not wear an engagement-ring.' But which was the 'she' he meant, was an enigma known only to himself. 'Not a man about them!' he repeated in a satisfied manner, for as yet the name of Dick had not sounded in his ear.





CHAPTER V.

BREAKING THE PEACE.

NAN went to Beach House to fetch her mother home, escorted by Laddie, who was growing a most rollicking and friendly little animal, and a great consolation to his mistress, whom he loved heartily with all his doggish heart.

They all three came back in an old fly belonging to their late host, and found Phillis waiting for them on the doorstep, who made her mother the following little speech :

‘Now, mammie, you are to kiss us, and tell us what good industrious girls we have been ; and then you are to shut your eyes, and look at nothing ; and then sit down in your old arm-chair, and try and make the best of everything.’

‘Welcome home, dearest mother,’ said Nan, softly kissing her. ‘Home is home, however poor it may be; and thank God for it,’ finished the girl reverently.

‘Oh, my darlings!’ exclaimed the poor mother; and then she cried a little, and Dulce came up and put a rose-bud in her hand; and Dorothy executed an old-fashioned curtsy, and hoped that her mistress and the dear young ladies would try and make themselves as happy as possible.

‘Happy, you silly old Dorothy! of course we mean to be as busy as bees, and as frolicsome as kittens!’ returned Phillis, who had recovered her old sprightliness, and was ready to-day for a dozen Mrs. Cheynes and all the clergy of the diocese. ‘Now, mammie, you are only to peep into this room; this is our work-room, and those are the curtains Mr. Drummond was kind enough to hang. In old days,’ continued Phillis, with mock solemnity, ‘the parson would have pronounced a benediction; but the modern Anglican performs another function, and with much gravity ascends the steps and hooks up the curtains of the new-comers.’

‘Oh, Phillis, how can you be so absurd ! I am sure it was very good-natured of him. Come, mother dear, we will not stand here listening to her nonsense ;’ and Nan drew her mother to the parlour.

It was a very small room ; but still, snug and comfortable, and full of pretty things. Tea was laid on the little round table that would hardly hold five, as Nan once observed, thinking of Dick ; and the evening’s sunshine was stealing in, but not too obtrusively. Mrs. Challoner tried not to think it dull, and endeavoured to say a word of praise at the arrangements Dulce pointed out to her ; but the thought of Glen Cottage, and her pretty drawing-room, and the veranda with its climbing roses, and the shady lawn with the seat under the acacia-trees, almost overpowered her. That they should come to this ! That they should be sitting in this mean little parlour, where there was hardly room to move, looking out at the little strip of grass, and the medlar-tree, and the empty green-house ! Nan saw her mother’s lip quiver, and adroitly turned the subject to their neighbours. She had so much to say

about Mr. Drummond and his sister, that Mrs. Challoner grew quite interested ; nevertheless, it was a surprise even to Nan when Dorothy presently opened the door, and Mr. Drummond coolly walked in with a magnificent basket of roses in his hand.

Nan gravely introduced him to her mother, and the young man accosted her ; but there was a little surprise on his face. He had taken it into his head that Mrs. Challoner would be a far older-looking and more homely person ; but the stately-looking woman before him might have been an older and faded edition of Nan. Somehow, her appearance confused him ; and he commenced with an apology for his intrusion :

‘I ought not to have been so uncere-
monious. I am afraid, as you have just
arrived, my visit will seem an intrusion ; but
my sister thought you would like some of
our roses’—he had obliged poor Mattie to
say so—‘and, as we had cut some fine ones,
we thought you ought to have them while
they are fresh.’

‘Thank you ; this is very kind and neigh-
bourly,’ returned Mrs. Challoner ; but, though

her tone was perfectly civil, Nan thought her manner a little cold, and hastened to interpose with a few glowing words of admiration.

‘The roses were lovely; they were finer than those at Longmead, or even at Fitzroy Lodge, though Lady Fitzroy prided herself on her roses.’ Archie pricked up his ears at this latter name, which escaped quite involuntarily from Nan. ‘And was it not good of Miss Drummond to spare them so many, and of Mr. Drummond to carry them?’ all of which Nan said with a sweet graciousness that healed the young man’s embarrassment in a moment.

‘Yes, indeed!’ echoed Mrs. Challoner, obedient, as usual, to her daughter’s lead. ‘And you must thank your sister, Mr. Drummond; and tell her how fond my girls are of flowers.’ But, though Mrs. Challoner said this, the roses were not without thorns for her. Why had not Miss Drummond brought them herself? She was pleased indeed that, under existing circumstances, anyone should be civil to her girls; but was there not a little patronage intended? She was not quite sure that she rejoiced in having such neighbours. Mr.

Drummond was nice and gentlemanly, but he was far too young and handsome for an unmarried clergyman—at least, that was her old-fashioned opinion ; and when one has three very good-looking daughters, and dreads the idea of losing one, one may be pardoned for distrusting even a basket of roses.

If Mr. Drummond perceived her slight coldness, he seemed quite determined to overcome it. He took small notice of Nan, who busied herself at once arranging the flowers under his eyes ; even Phillis, who looked good and demure this evening, failed to obtain a word. He talked almost exclusively to Mrs. Challoner, plying her with artful questions about their old home, which he now learnt was at Oldfield, and gaining scraps of information that enabled him to obtain a pretty clear insight into their present circumstances.

Mrs. Challoner, who was a soft-hearted woman, was not proof against so much sympathy. She perceived that Mr. Drummond was sorry for them, and she began to warm a little towards him. His manner was so respectful, his words so discreet ; and then he behaved so nicely, taking no notice of the girls, though

Nan was looking so pretty, but just talking to her in a grave responsible way, as though he were a gray-haired man of sixty.

Phillis was not quite sure she approved of it; in the old days she had never been so excluded from conversation: she would have liked a word now and then. But Nan sat by quite contented; it pleased her to see her mother roused and interested.

When Mr. Drummond took his leave, she accompanied him to the door, and thanked him quite warmly.

‘You have done her so much good, for this first evening is such a trial to her, poor thing!’ said Nan, lifting her lovely eyes to the young man’s face.

‘I am so glad. I will come again,’ he said, rather incoherently. And as he went out of the green door he told himself that it was his clear duty to befriend this interesting family. He ought to have gone home and written to Grace, for it was long past the time when she always expected to hear from him. But the last day or two he had rather shirked this duty. It would be difficult to explain to Grace. She might be rather

shocked, for she was a little prim in such things, being her mother's daughter. He thought he would ask Mattie to tell her about the Challoners, and that he was busy and would write soon ; and when he had made up his mind to this, he went down to the sea-shore and amused himself by sitting on a breakwater and staring at the fishing-smacks—which of course showed how very busy he was.

‘I think I shall like Mr. Drummond,’ observed Mrs. Challoner, in a tolerant tone, when Nan had accompanied the young Vicar to the door. ‘He seems an earnest, good sort of young man.’

‘Yes, mammie dear. And I am sure he has fallen in love with you,’ returned Phillis naughtily, ‘for he talked to no one else. And you are so young-looking and pretty that of course no one could be surprised if he did.’ But though Mrs. Challoner said, ‘Oh, Phillis!’ and looked dreadfully shocked in a proper matronly way, what was the use of that when the mischievous girl burst out laughing in her face?

But the interruption had done them all

good, and the evening passed less heavily than they had dared to hope. And when Mrs. Challoner complained of fatigue and retired early, escorted by Dorothy, who was dying for a chat with her mistress, the three girls went out in the garden, and walked, after their old fashion, arm-in-arm up and down the lawn, with Nan in the middle; though Dulce pouted and pretended that the lawn was too narrow, and that Phillis was pushing her on the gravel path.

Their mother's window was open, and they could have heard snatches of Dorothy's conversation if they had chosen to listen: Dulce stood still a moment, and wafted a little kiss towards her mother's room.

'Dear old mamsie! She has been very good this evening, has she not, Nan? She has only cried the least wee bit when you kissed her.'

'Yes, indeed. And somebody else has been good too. What do you say, Phillis? Has not Dulce been the best child possible?'

'Oh, Nan, I should be ashamed to be otherwise,' returned Dulce, in such an earnest manner that it made her sisters laugh. 'Do

you think I could see you both so good and cheerful, making the best of things, and never complaining, even when the tears are in your eyes—as yours are often, Nan, when you think no one is looking—and not try and copy your example? I am dreadfully proud of you both—that is what I am,’ continued the warm-hearted girl. ‘I never knew before what was in my sisters. And now I feel as though I want the whole world to come and admire my Phillis and Nan!’

‘Little flatterer!’ but Nan squeezed Dulce’s arm affectionately. And Phillis said in a joking tone :

‘Ah, it was not half so bad. This evening there was mother looking so dear and pretty; and there were you girls; and though the nest is small, it feels warm and cosy. And if we could only forget Glen Cottage, and leave off missing the old faces, which I never shall——’ (‘Nor I,’ echoed Nan, with a deep sigh, fetched from somewhere)—‘and root ourselves afresh, we shall contrive not to be unhappy.’

‘I think it is our duty to cultivate cheerfulness,’ added Nan seriously; and after this

they fell to a discussion on ways and means. As usual, Phillis was chief spokeswoman, but to Nan belonged the privilege of the casting vote.

The next few days were weary ones to Mrs. Challoner; there was still much to be done before the Friary could be pronounced in order. The girls spent most of the daylight hours unpacking boxes, sorting and arranging their treasures, and, if the truth must be told, helping Dorothy to polish furniture and wash glass and china.

Mrs. Challoner, who was not strong enough for these household labours, found herself condemned to hem new dusters, and mend old table-linen, to the tune of her own sad thoughts. Mr. Drummond found her sorting a little heap on the parlour-table, when he dropped in casually one morning; this time with some very fine cherries that his sister thought Mrs. Challoner would enjoy.

When Mr. Drummond began his little speech he could have sworn that there were tears on the poor lady's cheeks; but when he had finished she looked up at him with a smile, and thanked him warmly, and then they had quite a nice chat together.

Mr. Drummond's visit was quite a god-send, she told him, for her girls were busy and had no time to talk to her; and 'one's thoughts are not always pleasant companions,' she added, with a sigh. And Mr. Drummond, who had caught sight of the tears, was at once sympathetic, and expressed himself in such feeling terms—for he was more at ease in the girls' absence—that Mrs. Challoner opened out in the most confiding way, and told him a great deal that he had been anxious to learn.

But she soon found out, to her dismay, that he disapproved of her girls' plans; for he told her so at once, and in the coolest manner. The opportunity for airing his views on the subject was far too good to be lost. Mrs. Challoner was alone; she was in a low dejected mood; the rulers of the household were gathered in an upper chamber. What would Phillis have said, as she warbled a rather flat accompaniment to Nan's 'Bonnie Dundee,' which she was singing to keep up their spirits over a piece of hard work, if she had known that Mr. Drummond was at that moment in possession of her mother's ear?

'Oh, Mr. Drummond, this is very sad, if

everyone should think as you do about my poor girls! and Phillis does so object to being called romantic ;' for he had hinted in a gentlemanly way that he thought the whole scheme was crude and girlish and Quixotic to a degree.

'I hope you will not tell her, then,' returned Mr. Drummond, in a soothing tone, for Mrs. Challoner was beginning to look agitated. 'I am afraid nothing I say will induce Miss Challoner to give up her pet scheme; but I felt, as your clergyman, it was my duty to let you know my opinion;' and here Archie looked so very solemn that Mrs. Challoner, being a weak woman and apt to overvalue the least expression of masculine opinion, grew more and more alarmed.

'Oh yes!' she faltered; 'it is very good—very nice of you to tell me this.' Phillis would have laughed in his face, and Mrs. Cheyne would have found something to say about his youth; but in Mrs. Challoner's eyes, though she was an older woman, Archie's solemnity and oriental beard carried tremendous weight with them. He might be young, nevertheless she was bound to listen meekly

to him, and respect his counsel as one who had a certain authority over her. 'Oh, you are very good! and if only my girls had not made up their minds so quickly—but now, what can I do but feel very uncomfortable after you have told me this?'

'Oh, as to that, there is always time for everything; it is never too late to mend,' returned Mr. Drummond tritely. 'I meant from the first to tell you what I thought, if I should ever have an opportunity of speaking to you alone. You see, we Oxford men have our own notions about things; we do not always go with the tide. If your daughters——' here he hesitated and grew red, for he was a modest, honest young fellow in the main—'pardon me, but I am only proposing an hypothesis—if they wanted to make a sensation and get themselves talked about, no doubt they would achieve a success, for the novelty——' but here he stopped, reduced to silence by the shocked expression of Mrs. Challoner's face.

'Mr. Drummond! my girls—make a sensation—be talked about!' she gasped, and all the spirit of her virtuous matronhood, and all

the instinctive feeling that years of culture and engrained refinement of nature had engendered, shone in her eyes. Her Nan and Phillis and Dulce to draw this on themselves !

Now at this unlucky moment, when the maternal fires were all alight, who should enter but Phillis, wanting ‘pins, and dozens of them—quickly, please ;’ and still warbling flatly that refrain of ‘Bonnie Dundee.’

‘Oh, Phillis ! Oh, my darling child !’ cried Mrs. Challoner, quite hysterically ; ‘do you know what your clergyman says ? and if he should say such things, what will be the world’s opinion ? No, Mr. Drummond, I did not mean to be angry. Of course you are telling us this for our good ; but I do not know when I have been so shocked.’

‘Why, what is this ?’ demanded Phillis calmly ; but she fixed her eyes on the unlucky clergyman, who began to wish that that last speech had not been uttered.

‘He says it is to make a sensation—to be talked about—that you are going to do this,’ gasped Mrs. Challoner, who was far too much upset to weigh words truly.

‘What!’ Phillis only uttered that very unmeaning monosyllable; nevertheless, Archie jumped from his seat as though he had been shot.

‘Mrs. Challoner, really this is too bad! No, you must allow me to explain,’ as Phillis turned aside with a curling lip, as though she would leave them. He actually went between her and the door, as though he meant to prevent her egress forcibly. There is no knowing to what lengths he would have gone in his sudden agitation. ‘Only wait a moment, until I explain myself. Your mother has misunderstood me altogether. Never has such a thought entered my mind!’

‘Oh,’ observed Phillis. But now she stood still, and began to collect her pins out of her mother’s basket. ‘Perhaps, as this is rather unpleasant, you will have the kindness to tell me what it was you said to my mother?’ and she spoke like a young princess who has just received an insult.

‘I desire nothing more,’ returned Archie, determined to defend himself at all costs. ‘I had been speaking to Mrs. Challoner about all this unfortunate business. She was good

enough to repose confidence in me, and, as your clergyman, I felt myself bound to tell her exactly my opinions on the subject.'

'I do not quite see the necessity; but no doubt you know best,' was Phillis's somewhat sarcastic answer.

'At least, I did it for the best,' returned the young man humbly. 'I pointed out things to Mrs. Challoner, as I told you I should. I warned her what the world would say: that it would regard your plan as very singular and perhaps Quixotic. Surely there is nothing in this to offend you?'

'You have not touched on the worst part of all,' returned Phillis, with a little disdain in her voice. 'About making a sensation, I mean.'

'There it was that your mother so entirely misunderstood. What I said was this, "If this dressmaking scheme were undertaken just to make a sensation it would, of course, achieve success, for I thought the novelty might take." And then I added that I was merely stating an hypothesis by way of argument; and then Mrs. Challoner looked shocked, and you came in.'

‘Is that all?’ asked Phillis, coming down from her stilts at once, for she knew of old how her mother would confuse things sometimes; and, if this were the truth, she, Phillis, had been rather too hard on him.

‘Yes. Do you see now any necessity for quarrelling with me?’ returned Mr. Drummond, breathing a little more freely as the frown lessened on Phillis’s face. He wanted to be friends with these girls, not to turn them against him.

‘Well, no; I believe not,’ she answered quite gravely. ‘And I am sure I beg your pardon if I was rude.’ But this Archie would not allow for a moment.

‘But, Mr. Drummond, one word before peace is quite restored,’ went on Phillis, with something of her old archness, ‘or else I will fetch my sisters, and you will have three of us against you.’

‘Oh do, Phillis, my dear,’ interrupted her mother; ‘let them come and hear what Mr. Drummond thinks.’

‘Mammy, how dare you!—how dare you be so contumacious, after all the trouble we have taken to set your dear fidgety mind at

rest? Just look what you have done, Mr. Drummond,' turning upon him. 'Now I am not going to forgive you, and we will not trust the mother out of our sight, unless you promise not to say these sort of things to her, when we are not here to answer them.'

'But, Miss Challoner, my pastoral conscience!' but his eyes twinkled a little.

'Oh, never mind that!' she retorted mischievously. 'I will give you leave to lecture us collectively, but not individually: that must not be thought about for a moment.' She had not a notion what the queer expression on Mr. Drummond's face meant, and he did not know himself; but he had the strongest desire to laugh at this.

They parted after this the best of friends; and Phillis tasted the cherries, and pronounced them very good.

'You have quite forgiven me?' Mr. Drummond said, as she accompanied him to the door before rejoining her sisters. 'You know I have promised not to do it again until the next time.'

'Oh, we shall see about that!' returned Phillis good-humouredly. 'Fore-warned is

fore-armed; and there is a triple alliance against you.'

'Good heavens, what mockery it seems! I never saw such girls—never!' thought Mr. Drummond, as he took long strides down the road. 'But Mattie is right; they mean business, and nothing in the world would change that girl's determination if she had set herself to carry a thing out. I never knew a stronger will!' and in this he was tolerably right.





CHAPTER VI.

‘TRIMMINGS, NOT SQUAILS.’

THE longest week must have an end ; and so at last the eventful Monday morning arrived—‘Black Monday,’ as Dulce called it ; and then sighed as she looked out on the sunshine and the waving trees, and thought how delicious a long walk or a game of tennis would be, instead of stitch, stitch, stitching all day. But Dulce was an unselfish little soul, and kept all these thoughts to herself, and dressed herself quickly ; for she had overslept herself, and Phillis had long been downstairs.

Nan was locking up the tea-caddy as she entered the parlour, and Phillis was standing by the table, drawing on her gloves ; and her

lips were twitching a little—a way they had when Phillis was nervous.

Nan went up and kissed her, and gave her an encouraging pat.

‘That is for luck, my dear; and mind you make the best of poor Miss Milner’s dumpy, roundabout little figure. There, I have put the body-lining, and the measuring-tape, and a paper of pins, in this little black bag; and I have not forgotten the scissors—oh, dear no! I have not forgotten the scissors,’ went on Nan, with such surprising cheerfulness, that Phillis saw through it, and was down on her in a moment.

‘No, Nan; there, I declare I will not be such a goose. I am not nervous—not one bit; it is pure fun, that’s what it is. Dulce, what a naughty child you are to over-sleep yourself this morning; and I had not the heart to wake you—you looked so like a baby; and we never wake babies, because they are sure to squall!’

‘Oh, Phil, are you going to Miss Milner’s? I would have walked with you if I had had my breakfast; but I am so hungry.’

‘I could not possibly wait,’ returned Phillis;

'punctuality is one of the first duties of—hem—dressmakers; all orders executed promptly, and promises performed with undeviating regularity—those are my maxims. Eat a good breakfast, and then see if mammy wants any help, for Nan must be ready for me at the work-table, for she is our head cutter-out;' and then Phillis nodded briskly, and walked away.

By a singular chance Mr. Drummond was watering his ferns in the front court as Phillis passed, and in spite of her reluctance, for somehow he was the last person she wanted to encounter that day, she was obliged to wish him good-morning.

'Good-morning! Yes, indeed it is a glorious morning,' observed Archie brightly; 'and may I ask where you are going so early?'

'Only to the Library,' returned Phillis laconically; but the colour mounted to her forehead. 'We begin business to-day.'

And then Archie took up his watering-pot, and refrained from any more questions. It was absurd, perhaps; but at the moment he had forgotten, and the remembrance was not pleasing.

Phillis felt quite brave after this, and walked into the Library as though the place belonged to her. When it came to details, Miss Milner was far more nervous than she.

She would keep apologizing to Phillis for making her stand so long, and she wanted to hold the pins and to pick up the scissors that Phillis had dropped; and when the young dressmaker consulted her about the trimmings, she was far too humble to intrude her opinions.

‘Anything you think best, Miss Challoner, for you have such beautiful taste as never was seen; and I am sure the way you have fitted that body-lining is just wonderful, and would be a lesson to Miss Slasher for life. No, don’t put the pins in your mouth, there’s a dear.’

For in her intense zeal Phillis had thought herself bound to follow the manners of Mrs. Sloper, the village factotum, and she always did so, though Nan afterwards assured her that it was not necessary, and that in this particular they might be allowed to deviate from example.

But she was quite proud of herself when she had finished, for the material seemed to

mould under her fingers in the most marvellous way, and she knew the fit would be perfect. She wanted to rush off at once, and set to work with Nan; but Miss Milner would not let her off so easily. There was orange wine and seed-cake of her own making in the back parlour, and she had just one question—a very little question—to ask. And here Miss Milner coughed a little behind her hand to gain time and recover her courage.

‘The little papers were about the shop, and Mrs. Trimmings saw one, and—and——’ here Phillis came promptly to her relief.

‘And Mrs. Trimmings wants to order a dress, does she?’ and Phillis bravely kept down the sudden sinking of heart at the news.

Mrs. Trimmings was the butcher’s wife—the sister of that very Mrs. Squails of whom Dulce once made mention—well known to be the dressiest woman in Hadleigh, who was much given to imitate her betters. The newest fashions—the best materials—were always to be found on Mrs. Trimmings’ portly figure.

‘What could I do?’ observed Miss Milner

apologetically; 'the papers were about the shop, and what does the woman do but take one up. "I wonder what sort of dressmakers these are?" she said careless-like; "there is my new blue silk that Andrew brought himself from London, and paid five-and-sixpence a yard for in St. Paul's Churchyard; and I daren't let Miss Slasher have it, for she made such a mess of that French merino. She had to let it out at every seam before I could get into it, and it is so tight for me now that I shall be obliged to cut it up for Mary Anne. I wonder if I dare try these new people?"'

'And what did you say, Miss Milner?'

'What could I do then, my dear young lady, but speak up and say the best I could for you? for though Mrs. Trimmings is not high, not one of the gentry I mean, and has a rough tongue sometimes, still she knows what good stuff and good cutting-out means, and a word from her might do you a power of good among the townfolks, for her gowns are always after the best patterns.'

'All right!' returned Phillis cheerfully; 'one must creep before one runs, and until the gentry employ us, we ought to think

ourselves fortunate to work for the town-people. I am not a bit above making a dress for Mrs. Trimmings, though I would rather make one for you, Miss Milner, because you have been so kind to us.'

'There now, didn't I say there never were such young ladies!' exclaimed Miss Milner, quite affected at this. 'Well, if you are sure you don't mind, Miss Challoner dear, will you please go to Mrs. Trimmings this morning? for though I told her my dress was to be finished first, still, Trimmings' isn't a stone's-throw from here; and you may as well settle a thing when you are about it.'

'And I will take the silk, Miss Milner, if you will kindly let me have a nice piece of brown paper.'

'Indeed, and you will do no such thing, Miss Challoner; and there is Joseph going down with the papers to Mr. Drummond's, and will leave it at the Friary as he passes.'

'Oh, thank you,' observed Phillis gratefully. 'Then I will pencil a word to my sister, to let her know why I am detained; and she scrawled a line to Nan.'

'Trimmings, not Squails—here begin-

neth the first chapter. Expect me when you see me, and do nothing until I come.'

There was no side-door at Trimmings', and Mrs. Trimmings was at the desk, jotting down legs of mutton, and entries of gravy-beef and suet, with a rapidity that would have tried any other woman's brain except a butcher's wife.

When Phillis approached, she looked up at her suavely, expecting custom.

'Just half a moment, ma'am,' she said civilly. 'Yes, Joe, wing-rib, and half of suet to Mrs. Penfold, and a loin of lamb and sweetbread for No. 12, Albert Terrace. Now, ma'am, what can I do for you?'

'I have only come about your dress, Mrs. Trimmings,' returned Phillis, in a very small voice; and then she tried not to laugh, as Mrs. Trimmings regarded her with a broad stare of astonishment, which took her in comprehensively, hat, dress, and neat dogskin gloves.

'You might have taken up my pen and knocked me down with it,' was Mrs. Trimmings' graphic description of her feelings afterwards, as she carved a remarkably fine

loin of veal, with a knuckle of ham, and some kidney-beans to go with it. 'There was the Colonel standing by the desk, Andrew; and he turned right round, and looked at us both. "I've come about your dress, Mrs. Trimmings," she said, as pert-like as possible; law, I thought I should have dropped, I was that taken aback.'

Phillis's feelings were none of the pleasantest when Colonel Middleton turned round and looked at her. There was an expression almost of sorrow in the old man's eyes, as he so regarded her, which made her feel hot and uncomfortable. It was a relief when Mrs. Trimmings roused from her stupefaction and bustled out of the desk.

'This way, miss,' she said, with a jerk of her comely head. But her tone changed a little, and became at once sharp and familiar. 'I hope you understand your business, for I never could abide waste; and the way Miss Slasher cut into that grey merino—and it only just meets, so to say—and the breadths are as scanty as possible; and it would go to my heart to have a beautiful piece of silk spoiled, five-and-sixpence a yard, and not a flaw in it.'

‘If I thought I should spoil your dress I would not undertake it,’ returned Phillis gently. She felt she must keep herself perfectly quiet with this sort of people. ‘My sister and I have just made up some very pretty silk and cashmere costumes, and they fitted as perfectly as possible.’

‘Oh, indeed,’ observed Mrs. Trimmings, in a patronizing tone. She had no idea that the costume of which Phillis spoke had been worn by the young dressmaker at one of Lady Fitzroy’s afternoon parties. She was not quite at her ease with Phillis; she thought her a little high-and-mighty in her manner. ‘A ’uppish young person,’ as she said afterwards; ‘but her grand airs made no sort of difference to me, I can assure you.’

There was no holding pins or picking up scissors in this case. On the contrary, Mrs. Trimmings watched with a vigilant eye, and was ready to pounce on Phillis at the least mistake or oversight, seeing which, Phillis grew cooler and more offhand every moment. There was a great deal of haggling over the cut of the sleeve and arrangement of the drapery. ‘If you will kindly leave it to me,’

Phillis said once; but nothing was farther from Mrs. Trimmings' intention. She had not a silk dress every day. And she had always been accustomed to settle all these points herself, while Miss Slasher had stood by humbly turning over the pages of her fashion-books, and calling her at every sentence, 'Ma'am,' a word that Phillis's lips had not yet uttered. Phillis's patience was almost tired out, when she was at last allowed to depart, with a large brown-paper parcel under her arm. Mrs. Trimmings would have wrapped it up in newspaper, but Phillis had so curtly refused to have anything but brown-paper, that her manner rather overawed the woman.

Poor Phillis! Yes; it had really come to pass, and here she was, actually walking through Hadleigh in the busiest time of the day, with a large, ugly-looking parcel and a little black bag. She had thought of sending Dorothy for the dress, but she knew what a trial it would have been to the old woman to see one of her young ladies reduced to this, and she preferred lading herself to hurting the poor old creature's feelings. So she walked out bravely in her best style. But,

nevertheless, her shapely neck would turn itself now and then from side to side as though in dread of some familiar face. And there were little pin-pricks all over her of irritation and mortified self-love. 'A thing is all very well in theory, but it may be tough in practice,' she said to herself. And she felt an irresistible desire to return the offending dress to that odious Trimmings, and tell her she would have nothing to do with her—'a disagreeable old cat,' I am afraid Phillis called her, for one is not always charitable and civil-spoken in one's thoughts.

'We are going the same way. May I carry that formidable-looking parcel for you?' asked a voice that was certainly becoming very familiar.

Poor Phillis started and blushed; but she looked more annoyed than pleased at the rencontre.

'Mr. Drummond, are you omnipresent?—one is for ever encountering you!' she said, quite pettishly; but, when Archie only laughed, and tried to obtain possession of the parcel, she resisted, and would have none of his assistance.

'Oh dear no!' she said; 'I could not think of such a thing! Fancy the Vicar of Hadleigh condescending to carry home Mrs. Trimmings's dress!'

'Mrs. Trimmings's dress!' repeated Mr. Drummond, in a rapid crescendo. 'Oh, Miss Challoner! I declare this beats everything!'

Phillis threw him a glance. She meant it to be cool, but she could not keep the sadness out of her eyes; they did so contradict the assumed lightness of her words.

'Miss Milner was far more considerate; she made Joseph carry hers to the Friary when he left your papers. Was he not a benevolent Joseph? Mrs. Trimmings wanted to wrap up her silk in newspaper; but I said to myself, "One must draw the line somewhere;" and so I held out for brown paper. Do you think you could have offered to carry a parcel in newspaper, Mr. Drummond? Oh, by-the-bye, how can you condescend to walk with a dressmaker? But this is a quiet road, and no one will see you.'

'Pardon me if I contradict you, but there is Colonel Middleton looking over his garden-palings this moment,' returned Mr. Drum-

mond, who had just become painfully aware of the fact.

‘Don’t you think you had better go and speak to him then, for you see I am in no need of help?’ retorted Phillis, who was sore all over, and wanted to get rid of him, and yet would have been offended if he had taken her at her word; but Mr. Drummond, who felt his position an uncomfortable one, and was dreadfully afraid of the Colonel’s banter, was not mean enough to take advantage of her dismissal. He had joined himself to her company out of pure good-nature; for it was a hot day, and the parcel was heavy, but she would have none of his assistance.

So he only waved his hand to his friend, who took off his old felt hat very solemnly in return, and watched them with a grieved expression, until they were out of sight.

‘Now, I will bid you good-bye,’ he said, when they had reached the Vicarage.

Phillis said nothing; but she held out her hand, and there was a certain brightness in her eyes that showed she was pleased.

‘He is a gentleman every inch of him; and I won’t quarrel with him any more,’ she

thought, as she walked up to the Friary. 'Oh, how nice it would have been if we were still at Glen Cottage, and he could see us at our best, and we were able to entertain him in our old fashion! How Carrie and the other girls would have liked him! And how jealous Dick would have been! for he never liked our bringing strange young men to the house, and always found fault with them if he could;' and here Phillis sighed, and for the moment Mrs. Trimmings was forgotten.





CHAPTER VII.

‘BRAVO, ATALANTA!’

RHILLIS received quite an ovation as soon as she crossed the threshold. Dulce, who was listening for her footsteps, rushed out into the little hall, and dragged her in as though she were too weary to have any movement or volition of her own. And then Nan came up, in her calm elder-sisterly way, and put her arm round her, and hoped she was not so very tired, and there was so much to say, and so much to do, and she wanted her advice, and so on.

And on Nan's forehead lay a thoughtful pucker; and on the centre table were sundry breadths of green silk, crisp-looking and

faintly bronzed, like withered leaves with the sun on them.

'Oh dear! has Miss Drummond been here in my absence?' asked Phillis, with the overwhelmed feeling of a beginner, who has not yet learned to separate and classify, or the rich value of odd moments. 'Three dresses to be done at once!'

'One at a time. But never mind Miss Drummond's this moment. Mother is safe in the store-cupboard for the next half-hour, and we want to know what you mean by your ridiculous message, "Trimmings, not Squails." Dulce is dying of curiosity, and so am I.'

'Yes; but she looks so hot and tired, that she must refresh herself first;' and Dulce placed on her sister's lap a plate of yellow plums, perfectly bedded in moss, which had come from the Vicarage garden. And, as Phillis enjoyed the dainty repast, and poured out her morning's experiences in the ears of her astonished auditors, lo, the humiliation and the sting were forgotten, and only an intense sense of the humour of the situation remained.

It was Dulce whose pink cheeks were burning now.

‘Oh, Phillis ! how could you ? It is too dreadful even to think about ! That fat old thing, too ! Why, she is twice as big as Mrs. Squails.’

‘Beggars cannot be choosers, my dear,’ replied Phillis airily ; for rest was pleasant and the fruit was good, and it was so delicious to feel all that was over, and she was safe in her nest again ; and then the pleasure of talking it all over ! ‘Do you know——?’ she began, in a disconnected manner, and then sat and stared at her sisters with luminous gray eyes, until they begged to know what the new idea was.

‘Oh, nothing,’ she replied, and coloured a little. And then she blurted out, in an oddly ashamed way : ‘It was talking to you two dears that put it in my head. But I could not help thinking that moment, that if one is ever good enough to get to heaven, one of the greatest pleasures will be to talk about all our past miseries and difficulties, and how the angels helped us ! and, though you may laugh at me,’—they were doing nothing of

the kind, only admiring her with all their might—‘I have a kind of fancy that even my “Trimmings, not Squails” episode may have a different look up there!’

‘My dear,’ returned Nan gently, for she loved all these sort of speeches, being a devout little soul, and truly pious, ‘nothing was further from my thoughts than to laugh at you, for the more we think in this way the grander our work will appear to us. Mrs. Trimmings may be fat and vulgar, but when you were measuring her and answering her so prettily—and I know how nicely you would speak, Phil—I think you were as brave as one of those old knights—I cannot remember their names—who set out on some lofty quest or other!’

‘I suppose the child means Sir Galahad?’ observed Phillis, with a groan at Nan’s ignorance. ‘Oh, Nannie! I wish I could say,

“My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure;”

and then she softly chanted—for quotation never came amiss to her, and her head was

crammed with choice selections from the poets—

“All armed I ride, whate’er betide,
Until I find the Holy Grail.”

‘Yes, the Sangreal, or the Quest. It does not matter what, for it was only an allegory,’ returned Nan, who had plenty of ideas, only she confused them sometimes, and was not as clever in her definitions as Phillis. ‘It only meant that those grand old knights had some holy purpose and aim in their lives, for which they trained and toiled and fought. Don’t you see?—the meaning is quite clear. We can have our Quest too.’

‘Bless her dear heart, if she is not travelling thousands of years and miles from Mrs. Trimmings!’ exclaimed Phillis, who never could be serious long. ‘Well, Nannie, I understand you, though you are a trifle vague. We will have our Quest, and our unattainable standard; and I will be your maiden knight—yours and Dulce’s.

“How sweet are looks that ladies bend
On whom their favours fall,
For them I’ll battle till the end,
To save from shame and thrall.”

And when she had repeated this she rose, laughing, and said they were all a little demented; and what did they mean by wasting their time when there were three dresses to be cut out? and Dulce must have the work fixed for the sewing-machine.

For the next hour there was little talk, only the snipping sound of scissors and the rustling of silken breadths, and sometimes the swish and the tearing of sundry materials; and then the whirring and burring and tappings of Dulce's sewing-machine, like a dozen or two of woodpeckers at work on an iron-tree. And no one quoted any more poetry, for prose was heaped up everywhere about them, and their heads were full of business.

But in the afternoon, when things were in progress and looked promising, and Mrs. Challoner had had her nap, and was busy over some sleeves that they had given her to keep her quiet, and satisfy her maternal conscience that she was helping her girls, Phillis did hear a little about Miss Drummond's visit. The sewing-machine, which they worked by turns, had stopped for a time,

and they were all three round the table sewing and fixing as busily as possible ; and Phillis, remembering Sir Galahad, dared not say she was tired, only she looked out on the lengthening shadows with delight, and thought about tea and an evening walk just to stretch her cramped muscles. And if one day seemed so long, how would a week of days appear before the blessed Sunday gave them a few hours of freedom ?

It was at this moment that Nan, with fine tact, broke the silence that was good for work, but was apt to wax drowsy in time.

‘ Miss Milner’s dress is getting on well. How fast you two girls work, and mammie is doing the sleeves beautifully. Another afternoon you must let the work rest, mammie, and read to us, or Phillis will get restive. By-the-bye, Dulce, we have not told her a word about Miss Drummond’s visit.’

‘ No, indeed ; was it not good of her to come so soon ! ’ exclaimed Dulce. ‘ She told us she wanted to be our first customer, and seemed quite disappointed when we said that we were bound in honour and mere gratitude to send Miss Milner’s dress home first. “ Not

that I am in a hurry for my dress, for nobody cares what I wear," she said quite cheerfully; "but I wanted to be the first on your list." I wish we could oblige her, for she is a nice unaffected little thing; and I am beginning to like her, though she is a little fussy.'

'But she was as meek as a lamb about her dress,' added Nan, who was a first-rate needle-woman, and could work rapidly while she talked. 'Just fancy, Phil! she wanted to have a jacket with tabs and loose sleeves, just for comfort and coolness.'

'Loose sleeves and a jacket!' almost gasped Phillis, for the princess skirts were then worn, and jackets were consigned to oblivion for the time being. 'I hope you told her, Nan, that we had never worked for Mrs. Noah; neither had Mrs. Shem ever honoured us by her custom?'

'Well, no, Phillis; I was not quite so impertinent, and those sort of clever speeches never occur to me until you say them. But I told Miss Drummond that I could not consent to spoil her lovely dress in that way; and then she laughed and gave in, and owned she knew nothing about fashions, and that her

sister Grace always ordered her clothes for her, because she chose such ugly things. She sat and chatted such a long time with us; she had only just gone when you came home.'

'And she told us such a lot about this wonderful Grace,' went on Dulce; 'she says Archie quite worships her. Well, mammie,' as Mrs. Challoner poised her needle in mid-air, and regarded her youngest daughter with unfeigned astonishment, 'I am only repeating Miss Drummond's words—she said "Archie."'

'But, my dear, there was no need to be so literal,' returned Mrs. Challoner reprovingly; for she was a gentlewoman of the old school, and nothing grieved her more than slipshod English, or any idiom or idiotcy of modern parlance in the mouths of her bright young daughters; to speak of any young man except Dick without the ceremonious prefix was a heinous misdemeanour in her eyes. Dulce would occasionally trespass, and was always rebuked with much gravity. 'You could have said "her brother," could you not?'

'Oh, mammie, I am sure Providence intended you for an old maid, and you have

not fulfilled your destiny,' retorted Dulce, who was rarely awed by her mother's solemnity. 'All this fuss because I said "Archie." Oh, I forgot—that name is sacred: the Rev. Archibald Drummond adores his sister Grace.'

'And she must be very nice,' returned Mrs. Challoner, with an indulgent smile at her pet Dulce. 'I am sure, from what Miss Drummond told us this morning, that she must be a most superior person; why, Phillis, she teaches all her four younger sisters, and one of them is sixteen. Miss Drummond says she is never out of the schoolroom, except for an hour or two in the evening, when her father and brothers come home. There are two more brothers, I think she said. Dear, what a large family! and Miss Drummond hinted that they were not well off.'

'I should like to know that Grace,' began Phillis; and then she shook her head reflectively. 'No, depend upon it, we should be disappointed in her; family paragons are generally odious to other folk. Most likely she wears spectacles, and is a thin thread-papery sort of a person.'

‘On the contrary, she is a sweet-looking girl, with large melancholy eyes; for Miss Drummond showed us her photograph. So much for your imagination, Phil;’ and Dulce looked triumphant. ‘And she is only twenty-two; and, though not pretty, just the sort of face one could love.’

‘Some people’s swans turn out to be geese in the end,’ remarked Phillis provokingly; but she registered at the same time a mental resolve that she would cross-examine Mr. Drummond on the earliest opportunity about this wonderful sister of his. Oh, it was no marvel if he did look down on them when they had not got brains enough to earn their living except in this way! and Phillis stuck her needle into Miss Milner’s body-lining so viciously that it broke.

The sharp click roused Nan’s vigilance, and she looked up, and was at once full of pity for Phillis’s pale face.

‘You are tired, Phil, and so are we all,’ she said brightly; ‘and, as it is our first day of work, we will not overdo ourselves. Mammie, if you will make the tea, we will just tidy up, and look out the patterns for you to

match the trimmings and buttons to-morrow ;' for this same business of matching was rather hailed by Mrs. Challoner as a relief and amusement.

Phillis grumbled a little over this additional labour, though, at the same time, no one worked harder than she ; but she was careful to explain that it was her right, as a free-born Britoness, to grumble, and that it was as much a relief to her peculiar constitution as a good long yawn is to some people.

'And it answers two purposes,' as she observed ; 'for it airs the lungs, and relieves the mind, and no one takes any more notice than if I set the wind blowing. And thankful I am, and every mother's child of us, that Dorothy is approaching this room with her dustpan and brush. Dorothy, I have a nice little sum for you to do. How many snippets of green and black silk go to a dustpan ? Count them, and subtract all the tacking-thread, and Dulce's pins.'

'Phillis, you are just feverish from over-fatigue and sitting so long in one place, for you are used to running about ;' and Nan took her by the shoulders, and marched her

playfully to the small parlour, where Mrs. Challoner was waiting for them.

‘Come, girls!’ she said cheerfully. ‘Dorothy has baked your favourite little cakes, and there are new-laid eggs for those who are hungry; and I am sure you all earned your tea, darlings. And, oh, Phillis! how tired you look!’ and Mrs. Challoner looked round on each face in turn, in the unwise but loving way of mothers.

This was too much for Phillis; and she interlaced her fingers, and put them suddenly and sternly over her mother’s eyes.

‘Now, mammie, promise.’

‘Phillis, my dear, how can you be so absurd!’ but Mrs. Challoner strove in vain to release herself. Phillis’s fingers had iron tenacity in them when she chose.

‘A thing like this must be nipped in the bud,’ pronounced Phillis, apostrophizing her laughing sisters. ‘You must not look at us in that fashion every evening as though we were sheep in a pen, or rabbits for sale. You will be weighing us next; and my nerves will not stand it. No, mother; here I strike. I will not be looked at in that manner.’

'But, Phillis. Oh, you nonsensical child!'

'Personal remarks are to be tabooed from this moment. You must not say, "How tired you look!" or "How pale you are!" It is not manners at the Friary, and it is demoralizing. I am ten times more tired this minute than I was before you told me so.'

'Very well, Phillis; but you must let me pour out the tea.' And then Phillis subsided. But she had started the fun, and Dulce soon took it up and set the ball rolling. And Dorothy, working hard with her dust-pan and brushes, heard the merriment, and her old face lighted up.

'Bless their sweet faces—pretending to be happy, just to cheer up the mistress, and make believe it is only a game they are having!' muttered the old woman, as she paused to listen. 'But if I am not mistaken, Miss Phillis, poor dear, is just ready to drop with fatigue. Only to hear her, one would think she was as perky as possible.'

When the evening meal was over, Mrs. Challoner leaned back in her chair and made a little speech to her daughters.

‘Thank you, my dears. You have done me so much good. Now, if you want to please me, you will all three put on your hats and take a nice long walk together.’

The girls looked at each other, and every pair of eyes said as plainly as possible, ‘What a delicious idea! But only two can go, and I intend to be the filial victim.’ But Mrs. Challoner was too quick for them. ‘I said all three,’ she remarked, very decidedly. ‘If one offers to stay with me I shall just put myself to bed and lock the door; but if you will be good, and enjoy this lovely evening, I will take my book in the garden and be quite happy until you come back to me.’ And when they saw that she meant it, and would only be worried by a fuss, they went off as obediently as possible.

They walked very sedately down the Braidwood Road, and past the White House; but when they got into the town, Phillis hurried them on a little. ‘I don’t want people. It is air and exercise and freedom for which I am pining.’ And she walked so fast that they had some trouble to keep up with her.

But when they had left every trace of

human habitation behind them, and were strolling down the rough, uneven beach, towards a narrow strip of sand, that would soon be covered by the advancing tide, Phillis said, in an odd, breathless way: 'Nan, just look round and see if there be anyone in sight, before, behind, or around us;' and Nan, though in some little surprise, did at once as she was bid in the most thorough manner. For she looked up at the sky first, as though she were afraid of balloons or possible angels; and then at the sea, which she scanned narrowly, so that not even a fish could escape her; and after that she beat the boundaries of the land.

'No. There is not a creature in sight except ourselves and Laddie,' she answered.

'Very well,' answered Phillis promptly. 'Then if it be all safe, and the Hadleigh wits are away wool-gathering, and you will not tell mother, I mean to have a race with Dulce, as far as we can run along the shore; and if I do not win——' And here she pursed up her lips and left her sentence unfinished, as though determined to be provoking.

'We shall see about that,' returned Dulce,

accepting the challenge in a moment ; for she was always ready to follow a good lead.

‘Oh, you foolish children !’ observed Nan, in her staid fashion. But she did not offer the slightest remonstrance, knowing of old that unless Phillis found some safety-valve she would probably wax dangerous. So she called Laddie to her, and held him whining and struggling, for he wanted to stretch his little legs too, thinking a race was good for dogs as well as girls. But Nan would not hear of it for a moment ; he might trip them up, and cause another sprained ankle.

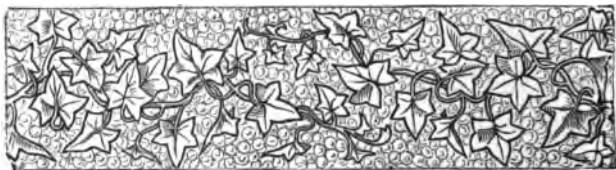
‘Now, Nan, you must be umpire, and say, One, two, three !’ and Nan again obeys, and then watches them with interest. Oh, how pretty it was ! if only anyone could have seen it, except the crabs and the starfish, and they never take much notice : the foreground of the summer sea coming up with little purple rushes, and a fringe of foam ; the yellow sand, jagged, uneven, with salt-water pools here and there ; the two girls in their light dresses skimming over the ground with swift feet, skirting the pools, jumping lightly over stones, even climbing a breakwater, then running

along another level piece of sand—Dulce a little behind, but Phillis as erect and sure-footed as Atalanta.

Now Nan has lost them, and puts Laddie down and prepares to follow. In spite of her staidness, she would have dearly loved a run too; only she thinks of Dick, and forbears.

Dulce, who is out of breath, fears she must give up the race, and begins to pant and drop behind in earnest, and to wish salt-water were fresh, and then to dread the next breakwater as a hopeless obstacle; but Phillis, who is still as fresh as possible, squares her elbows as she has seen athletes do, and runs lightly up to it, unmindful and blissfully ignorant of human eyes behind a central hole.

Some one who is of a classical turn has been thinking of the daughter of Iasus and Clymene, and cries out, 'Bravo, Atalanta! but where is Milanion, that he has forgotten the golden apples?' and Phillis, stricken dumb by the question and the sudden apparition of a bearded face behind the breakwater, remains standing as though she were carved in stone.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘MOTHERS ARE MOTHERS.’

‘**M**R. DRUMMOND ! Oh dear ! is one never to be free from pastoral supervision ?’ muttered Phillis half sulkily, when she roused from her stupefaction, and had breath to take the offensive. And what he would think of her ! But that was a question to be deferred until later, when nightmares and darkness and troublesome thoughts harass the unwary soul. ‘Like a dog he hunts in dreams,’ she might have said to herself, quoting from ‘Locksley Hall.’ But she did nothing of the kind ; only looked at the offending human being with such an outraged dignity in her bearing that Mr. Drummond nearly committed himself by bursting out laughing.

He refrained with difficulty, and said, rather drily :

‘ That was a good race, but I saw you would win from the first ; and you jumped that stone splendidly. I suppose you know the story of Atalanta ?’

‘ Oh yes,’ responded Phillis gloomily ; but she could not help showing off her knowledge all the same ; and she had always been so fond of heathen mythology, and had even read translations of Homer and Virgil. ‘ She had a she-bear for a nurse, and was eventually turned into a lion ; and I always thought her very stupid for being such a baby, and stopping to pick up the golden apple.’

‘ Nevertheless, the subject is a charming one for a picture,’ returned Archie, with admirable readiness, for he saw Phillis was greatly hurt by this untoward accident, and he liked the girl all the better for her spirit. He would not have discovered himself at all, only in another moment she must have seen him ; and if she would only have believed how fully he entered into the fun, and how graceful and harmless he thought it, there would be no pang of wounded self-esteem left.

But girls, especially if they be worthy of the name, are so sensitive and prickly on such matters.

Dulce had basely deserted her sister, and, at the sight of the clerical felt hat, had fled to Nan's side for protection.

'Oh, never mind,' Nan had said, consoling her; 'it is only Mr. Drummond. And he will know how it was, and that we thought there was not a creature in sight.' Nevertheless, she felt a little sorry in her heart that such a thing had happened. It would spoil Phillis's mirth, for she was very proud; and might shock their mother.

'Oh, he will think us such tomboys for grown-up young ladies!' sighed Dulce, who was only just grown up.

'Never mind what he thinks,' returned Nan, walking fast, for she was anxious to come to Phillis's relief. She joined them very quietly, and held out her hand to Archie as though nothing had happened.

'Is this a favourite walk of yours, Mr. Drummond? We thought we had it all to ourselves, and so the girls had a race. They will be dreadfully troubled at having a spec-

tator ; but it might be worse, for you already know us well enough not to misconstrue a little bit of fun.'

'I am glad you judge me so truly,' returned Archie, with a gleam of pleasure in his eyes. Phillis certainly looked uncommonly handsome, as she stood there flushed and angry. But how sweet and cool Nan looked—not a hair ruffled or a fold of her dress out of order ; whereas Dulce's brown locks were all loose about her shoulders, shaken down by the exercise. Nevertheless, at that moment Phillis looked the most striking.

'I am afraid my sudden appearance has put your sister out dreadfully. I assure you I would have made myself into thin air if I could,' went on Archie penitently ; 'but all the same, it was impossible not to applaud the winner. I felt inclined to wave my hat in the air, and cry, "Bravo, Atalanta!" half-a-dozen times. You made such pretty running, Miss Challoner ; and I wish Grace could have seen it.'

The last word acted like magic on Phillis's cloudy brow. She had passed over two

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delicately implied compliments with a little scorn. Did he think her, like other girls, to be mollified by sugar-plums and sweet speeches? He might keep all that for the typical young lady of Hadleigh. At Oldfield the young men knew her better.

It must be owned that the youth of that place had been slightly in awe of Phillis. One or two had even hinted that they thought her strong-minded. 'She has stand-off ways, and rather laughs at a fellow, and makes one feel sometimes like a fool,' they said; which did not prove much, except that Phillis showed herself above nonsense, and had a knowledge of shams, and would not be deceived; and being the better horse of the two, showed it; and no man likes to be taken down in his class.

As Phillis would not flirt—not understanding the art, but Dulce proved herself to be a pretty apt pupil—they left off trying to make her, and talked sensibly to her instead, which she liked better. But though more than one had admired her, no one had ventured to persuade himself or her that he was in love; but for that there was plenty of time, Phillis

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not being the sort of girl to remain long without a lover.

So when she heard Grace's name she pricked up her ears, and the proud look left her face; and she said a little archly, but in a way that pleased Mr. Drummond:

'All the same, I am glad your sister was not here, for she would think Dulce and me such tomboys!' using Dulce's very expression.

Archie shook his head very decidedly at this.

'Ah! you do not know Grace, and how she loves a bit of fun—only she never gets it, poor girl!' sighing in a marked manner, for he saw how interested Phillis looked. 'If you could only hear her laugh—but please sit down a moment and rest yourselves,' continued the artful young man, who had not dared to propose such a thing before.

Nan hesitated; but a glance at Phillis's hot face decided her.

'Just for five minutes,' she said, 'and then we must go back to mother;' for she had already determined that they must cut their walk short for the purpose of getting rid of Mr. Drummond.

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And then they sat down on the beach, and Dulce retired behind the breakwater to take off her hat and tuck up her hair; while Archie, taking no notice, leant against the other side, and felt well contented with his position—three such pretty girls, and all the world well away!

‘Is Grace your favourite sister?’ asked Phillis suddenly, as she menaced Laddie with a small pebble.

This was a lucky opening for Archie. He was never seen to more advantage than when he was talking about Grace. There was no constraint or consciousness about him at such times; but he would speak with a simple earnestness that made people say, ‘What a good fellow he was!’

‘Oh, she has always been that, you know!’ he said brightly; ‘ever since she was a little thing, and I used to carry her about in my arms, and string horse-chestnuts for her, when she was the funniest, merriest little creature, and so clever. I suppose when a man has seven sisters he may be allowed to have a favourite among them? and there is not one of them to compare with Grace.’

'Seven sisters!' repeated Nan, with a smile; and then she added, 'you are very lucky, Mr. Drummond.'

Archie shrugged his shoulders at this; he had never quite recognised his blessings in this respect. Isabel and Tottie might be tolerated, but he could easily have dispensed with Susie and Laura and Clara; he had a knack of forgetting their existence when he was absent from them, and when he was at home he did not always care to be reminded of their presence. He was one of those men who are very exacting to their women-kind, who resent it as a personal injury if they fail in good looks, or are not pleasant to the eye. He did not go so far as to say to himself that he could dispense with poor Mattie too, but he certainly acted on most occasions as though he thought so.

'Are you not fond of all your sisters?' asked Phillis, rather maliciously, for she had remarked the shrug.

'Oh, as to that,' replied the young man, colouring a little, 'one cannot expect to be interested in a lot of schoolgirls. I am afraid I know very little about the four youngest,

except that they are working Grace to death. Just fancy, Miss Challoner!' he continued, addressing Nan, and quite disregarding Phillis's sympathetic looks. 'Grace has actually no life of her own at all; she teaches those girls, sits with them, walks with them, helps them mend their clothes, just like a daily or rather a nursery governess, except that she is not paid, and has no holidays. I cannot think how my mother can find it in her heart to work her so hard!' finished Archie, excited to wrath at the remembrance of Grace's wrongs.

'Well, do you know,' returned Nan thoughtfully, as he seemed to expect an answer to this, and Phillis for a wonder was silent, 'I cannot think your sister an object of pity. Think what a good and useful life she is leading! She must be a perfect treasure to her mother; and, I dare say, they all love her dearly.'

'The girls do,' was the somewhat grudging response; 'they follow her about like four shadows, and even Isabel can do nothing without her advice. When I am at home I can scarcely get her for a moment to myself;

it is "Grace, come here," and "Grace, please do this for me," until I wonder she is not worn out.'

'Oh, how happy she must be!' responded Nan softly, for to her no lot seemed sweeter than this. To be the centre and support of a large family circle—the friend and trusted confidante of each! What a wonderful creature this Grace must be! and how could he speak of her in that pitying tone! 'No life of her own'! Well, what life could she want better than this? To be the guide and teacher of her younger sisters, and to be loved by them so dearly! 'Oh, I think she is to be envied! her life must be so full of interest,' she said, addressing the astonished Archie, who had certainly never taken this view of it. And when she had said this, she gave a slight signal to her sisters, which they understood at once; and then they paced slowly down the beach, with their faces towards the town, talking as they went.

They did not walk four abreast, as they used to do in the Oldfield lanes; but Nan led the way with Mr. Drummond, and Phillis and Dulce dropped behind.

Archie was a little silent ; but presently he said, quite frankly, as though he had known her for years—but from the first moment he had felt strangely at home with these girls :

‘Do you know, you have thrown a fresh light on a vexed subject. I have been worrying myself dreadfully about Grace. I wanted her to live with me because there was more sympathy between us than there ever will be between my sister Mattie and myself. We have more in common, and think the same on so many subjects ; and I knew how happy I could have made her.’

‘Yes, I see,’ returned Nan ; and she looked up at him in such an interested way that he found no difficulty in going on.

‘We had planned for years to live together ; but when I accepted the living, and the question was mooted in the family council, my mother would not hear of it for a moment. She said Grace could not possibly be spared.’

‘Well, I suppose not, after what you have told me. But it must have been a great disappointment to you both,’ was Nan’s judicious reply.

‘I have never ceased to regret my mother’s

decision,' he returned warmly; 'and as for Grace, I fear she has taken the disappointment grievously to heart.'

'Oh, I hope not!'

'Isabel writes to my sister Mattie that Grace is looking thin and pale, and has lost her appetite, and she thinks the mother is getting uneasy about her; and I cannot help worrying myself about it, and thinking how all this might have been averted.'

'I think you are wrong in that,' was the unexpected answer. 'When one has acted rightly to the very best of one's power, it is no use worrying about consequences.'

'How do you mean?' asked Archie, very much surprised at the decided tone in which Nan spoke. He had thought her too soft in manners to possess much energy and determination of character; but he was mistaken.

'It would be far worse if your sister had not recognised her duty, and refused to remain at home. One cannot find happiness if one moves out of one's allotted niche; but, of course, you know all this better than I, being a clergyman. And, oh! how beautifully you spoke to us last Sunday!' finished Nan,

remembering all at once that she was usurping his place, and preaching a little sermon of her own.

‘Never mind that,’ he replied impatiently ; ‘tell me what you mean. There is something behind your speech—you think I am wrong in pitying poor Grace so much ?’

‘If you ask me so plainly, I must say yes, though perhaps I am not competent to judge ; but, from what you tell me, I think you ought not to pity her at all. She is fulfilling her destiny. Is she not doing the work given her to do ? and what can any girl want more ? You should trust your mother, I think, Mr. Drummond ; for she would not willingly overwork her. Mothers are mothers ; you need not be afraid,’ said Nan, looking up in her clear honest way.

‘Thank you ; you have taken a weight off my mind,’ returned Archie, more moved by this than he cared to own. That last speech had gone home ; he must trust his mother. In a moment scales seemed to fall from the young man’s eyes as he walked along gravely and silently by Nan. ‘Why, what manner of girls could these be ?’ he thought ; ‘frolic-

some as kittens, and yet possessing the wisdom of mature womanhood?' and those few simple words of Nan abided long with him.

What if he and Grace were making a mistake, and there was no hardship in her case at all; only clear duty, and a most high privilege, as Nan hinted? What if his mother were right, and only they were wrong?

The idea was salutary, but hardly pleasant; for he had certainly aided and abetted Grace in her discontent, and had doubtless increased her repinings at her dull surroundings. Surely Grace's talents had been given her for a purpose; else why was she so much cleverer than the others—so gifted with womanly accomplishments? And that clear head of hers; she had a genius for teaching, he had never denied that. Was his mother, a sensible large-sighted woman in her way, to be secretly condemned as a tyrant, and wanting in maternal tenderness for Grace, because she had made use of this gifted daughter for the good of her other children, and refused to part with her at Archie's request?

Archie began to feel uncomfortable, for conscience was waxing warm within him;

and there had been a grieved hurt tone in his mother's letters of late, as though she had felt herself neglected by him.

'Mothers are mothers; you need not be afraid,' Nan had said, with the simple wholesome faith in the instincts of motherhood; and the words had come home to him with the strongest power.

His poor harassed mother, and what a hard life hers had been! Archie began to feel his heart quite tender towards her—perhaps she was a little severe and exacting with the girls, but they none of them understood her in the least, 'for her bark was always worse than her bite,' thought Archie; and girls, at least the generality of them, are sometimes aggravating.

He thought of the weary times she must have had with his father—for Mr. Drummond could make himself disagreeable to his wife when things went wrong with him—and the sullen fortitude with which he bore his reversal of fortune, gave small opening to her tenderness; the very way in which he shirked all domestic responsibilities, leaving on her shoulders the whole weight of the domestic

machinery, and all the home-management, had hardened and embittered her.

A large family and small means, little support from her husband—who interfered less and less with domestic matters—all this had no doubt fostered the arbitrary will that governed the Drummond household. If her husband had only kept her in check—if he had supported her authority, and not left her to stand alone, she would have been—not a better woman, for Archie knew his mother was good—but she would have been softer and more lovable, and her children would have seen deeper into her heart.

Some such thoughts as these passed through Archie's mind as he walked beside Nan; but he worked them out more carefully when he was alone that night. Just before they reached the Friary, he had started another subject; for turning to Phillis and Dulce, whom he had hitherto ignored, he asked them whether he might enrol one or all of them amongst his Sunday-school teachers.

Phillis's eyes sparkled at this.

'Oh, Nan, how delightful! it will remind us of Oldfield.'

‘Yes, indeed!’ chimed in Dulce, who had left her infant class with regret; but to their surprise Nan demurred.

‘At Oldfield things were very different,’ she said decidedly; ‘we played all the week, and it was no hardship to teach the dear children on Sunday; but now we shall have to work so hard that we shall be glad of one day’s rest.’

‘But surely you might spare us one hour or two in the afternoon?’ returned Archie, putting on what Grace called ‘his clerical face.’

‘In the afternoons mother will be glad of our company, and sometimes we shall indulge in a walk. No, Mr. Drummond, our weekdays are too full of work, and we shall need all the rest we can get on Sunday;’ and with a smile, Nan dismissed the subject.

Phillis spoke regretfully of it when he had left them.

‘It would have been so nice,’ she pleaded, but Nan was inexorable.

‘You can go if you like, Phil; but I think mother is entitled to that one afternoon in the week, and I will not consent to any parish work on that account; and then I am sure

we shall often be so tired;' and Nan's good sense as usual carried the day.

After that they all grouped round the window in the little parlour, and repeated to their mother every word of their conversation with Mr. Drummond.

Mrs. Challoner grew alarmed and tearful in a moment.

'Oh, my darlings, promise me to be more careful for the future!' she pleaded. 'Of course it was only fun, Phillis, and he will not think anything of it. Still, in a strange place, where no one knows you——'

'Dulce and I will never run a race again—I think I can promise you that,' replied Phillis very grimly, who felt that 'Bravo, Atalanta!' would haunt her in her dreams.

'And—and I would not walk about with Mr. Drummond, though he is our clergyman and a very gentlemanly person. People might talk; and in your position, my poor dears'—Mrs. Challoner hesitated, for she was very nice in her scruples, and not for worlds would she have hinted to her daughters that Mr. Drummond was young and unmarried, and a very handsome man in the bargain—'you

see I cannot always be with you, and as you have to work for your living, and cannot be guarded like other girls, you have all the more need to be circumspect. You don't think me over-strict, do you, darlings ?'

'No, dear mother, you are perfectly right,' returned Nan, kissing her. 'I knew how you would feel, and so we came home directly to get rid of him; it would never do for the Vicar of the parish to be seen walking about with dressmakers.'

'Don't, Nan!' exclaimed Phillis, with a shudder. Nevertheless, as she turned away she remembered how she had enjoyed that walk down the Braidwood Road that very morning, when he offered to carry home Mrs. Trimmings's dress and she would not let him.





CHAPTER IX.

MATTIE'S NEW DRESS.

THE remainder of the week passed harmlessly and without any special event to mark it, and thanks to Nan's skilful management and Phillis's pride, there were no further *contretemps* to shock Mrs. Challoner's sense of propriety. The work progressed with astonishing rapidity; in the mornings the young dressmakers were sufficiently brisk and full of zeal, and in the afternoons, when their energies flagged and their fingers grew weary, Dulce would sing over her task, or Mrs. Challoner would read to them for the hour together, but notwithstanding the interest of the tale, there was always great alacrity manifested when the

tea bell gave them the excuse for putting away their work.

On one or two evenings they gardened, and Mrs. Challoner sat under the mulberry-tree and watched them; on another occasion they took a long country walk and lost themselves, and came back merry and tired, and laden with primrose roots and ferns: they had met no one, except a stray labourer—had seen glow-worms, picked wild flowers, and declared themselves mightily refreshed. One evening Phillis, who was not to be repressed, contrived a new amusement.

‘Life is either a mill-pond or a whirlpool,’ she said, rather sententiously; ‘we have been stagnant for three days, and I begin to feel flat. Races are tabooed—besides, we cannot always leave mother alone. I propose we go out in the garden and have a game of battle-dore and shuttlecock,’ for this had been a winter pastime with them at the cottage.

Nan, who was always rather sober-minded now, demurred to this. She would have preferred gardening a little, or sitting quietly with her mother under the mulberry-tree, but Phillis, who was in a wild mood, over-

ruled all her objections, and by-and-by the battle began, and the shuttlecocks flew through the air.

The week's work was finished, and the three dresses lay in their wrappers, waiting for Dorothy to convey them to their several owners. Nan, who was really an artiste at heart, had called her mother proudly into the work-room to admire the result of their labours. Mrs. Challoner was far too accustomed to her daughters' skilfulness to testify any surprise, but she at once pronounced Miss Drummond's dress the *chef d'œuvre*. Nan's taste was faultless; and the trimmings she had selected harmonised so well with the soft tints of the silk.

'They are all very nice; and Mrs. Trimmings will be charmed with her blue silk,' observed Mrs. Challoner, trying to throw a little interest into her voice, and to suppress a sigh; and then she helped Nan to adjust the wrappers, and pin the neatly written bills inside each.

'I am sure that is business-like,' said Nan, with a satisfied nod, for she never could do anything by halves; and she was so interested

in her work, that she would have been heart-broken if she thought one of the dresses would be a misfit ; and then it was that Phillis, who had been watching her very closely, brightened up and proposed a game.

It was a very pretty sight, the mother thought, as she followed her girls' movements ; the young figures swayed so gracefully as they skimmed hither and thither over the lawn with light butterfly movements—the three eager faces upturned in the evening light, their heads held well back.

‘ Two hundred, two hundred and one, two hundred and two—don't let it drop, Dulce ! ’ panted Phillis breathlessly.

‘ Oh, my darlings, don't tire yourselves ! ’ exclaimed Mrs. Challoner, as her eyes followed the white flutter of the shuttlecocks.

This was the picture that Mr. Drummond surveyed. Dorothy, who was just starting on her round, and was in no mood for her errand, had admitted him somewhat churlishly.

‘ Yes, the mistress and the young ladies were in ; and would he step into the parlour, as her hands were full. ’

‘ Oh yes, I know the way, ’ Mr. Drummond

had returned, quite undaunted by the old woman's sour looks.

But the parlour was empty, save for Laddie, who had been shut up there not to spoil sport, and who was whining most piteously to be let out. He saluted Archie with a joyous bark, and commenced licking his boots and wagging his tail with mute petition to be released from this durance vile.

Archie patted and fondled him, for he was good to all dumb creatures.

‘Poor little fellow! I wonder why they have shut you up here?’ he said; and then he took him up in his arms, and stepped to the window to reconnoitre.

And then he stood and looked—perfectly fascinated by the novel sight. His sisters played battledore and shuttlecock in the schoolroom sometimes, or out in the passages on a winter's afternoon. He had once caught Susie and Clara at it, and had laughed at them in no measured terms for indulging in such a babyish game. ‘I should have thought Dottie might have played at that,’ he had said rather contemptuously. ‘I suppose you indulge in skipping-ropes sometimes;’ and the

poor girls had paused in their game, feeling ashamed of themselves, Archie would think them such hoydens.

He remembered his reprimand with a strange feeling of compunction, as he stood by the window trying vainly to elude Laddie's caresses. What a shame of him to have spoiled those poor children's game with his sneer, when they had so little fun in their lives ; and yet, as he recalled Clara's clumsy gestures and Susie's short-sighted attempts, he was obliged to confess that battledore and shuttlecock wore a different aspect now. Could anything surpass Phillis's swift-handed movements—brisk, graceful, alert, or Nan's attitude, as she sustained the duel. Dulce, who seemed dodging in between them in a most eccentric way, had her hair loose as usual, curling in brown lengths about her shoulders. She held it with one hand, as she poised her battledore with the other. This time Archie thought of Nausicaa and her maidens tossing the ball beside the river, after washing the wedding garments. Was it in this way the young dressmakers disported themselves during the evenings ?

It was Phillis who first discovered the intruder. The shuttlecocks had become entangled, and fallen to the ground. As she stooped to pick them up, her quick eyes detected a coat-sleeve at the window; and an indefinable instinct, for she could not see his face, made her call out:

‘Mother, Mr. Drummond is in the parlour. Do go to him, while Dulce puts up her hair.’ And then she said severely, ‘I always tell you not to wear your hair like that, Dulce. Look at Nan and me—we are quite unruffled; but yours is always coming down. If you have pretty hair, you need not call people’s attention to it in this way.’ At which speech Dulce tossed her head and ran away, too much offended to answer.

When Archie saw Mrs. Challoner crossing the lawn with the gait of a queen, he knew he was discovered; so he opened the window, and stepped out in the coolest possible way.

‘I seem always spoiling sport,’ he said, with a mischievous glance at Phillis, which she received with outward coolness and an inward twinge. ‘Bravo, Atalanta!’ sounded

in her ears again. 'Your maid invited me in; but I did not care to disturb you.'

'I am glad you did not open the window before,' returned Nan, speaking with that directness and fine simplicity that always put things to rights at once; 'it would have startled us before we got to the five hundred, and then Phillis would have been disappointed. Mother, shall we bring out some more chairs instead of going into the parlour—it is so much pleasanter out here?' and, as Mrs. Challoner assented, they were soon comfortably established on the tiny lawn; and Archie, very much at his ease, and feeling himself unaccountably happy, proceeded to deliver some trifling message from his sister, that was his ostensible reason for his intrusion.

'Why does she not deliver her messages herself?' thought Phillis; but she kept this remark to herself. Only that evening, she watched the young clergyman a little closely, as though he puzzled her. Phillis was the man of the family; and it was she who always stood upon guard if Nan or Dulce needed a sentinel. She was beginning to

think Mr. Drummond came very often to see them, considering their short acquaintance. If it were Miss Mattie, now, who ran in and out with little offerings of flowers and fruit in a nice neighbourly fashion! But for this very dignified young man to burthen himself with these slight feminine messages — a question about new-laid eggs, which even Nan had forgotten.

Phillis was quite glad when her mother said :

‘You ought to have brought your sister, Mr. Drummond; she must be so dull all alone,’ forgetting all about the dressmaking, poor soul! but Phillis remembered it a moment afterwards, with a rush of bitter feeling.

Perhaps, after all, that was why he came in so often, because he was so sorry for them, and wished to help them, as he said. A clergyman has more privileges than other men; perhaps she was wrong to suspect him. He might not wish his sister to visit them, except in a purely business-like way; but with him it was different. Most likely he had tea with Mrs. Trimmings sometimes, just

to show he was not proud ; he might even sit and chat with Mrs. Squails, and not feel compromised in the least. Oh yes ! how stupid she was to think he admired Nan, because she had intercepted a certain glance ! That was her mania, thinking everyone must be after Nan. Things were different now.

Of course he would be their only link with civilized society—the only cultivated mind with which they could hold converse ; and here Phillis ceased to curl her lip, and her gray eyes took a sombre shade, and she sighed so audibly that Archie broke off an interesting discussion on last Commemoration, and looked at her in unfeigned surprise.

‘ Oh yes ! we were there,’ returned Nan innocently, who loved to talk of these dear old times ; ‘ and we were at the *fête* at Oriel, and at the concert at Magdalen also. Ah ! do you remember, Dulce ?’ and then she faltered a little and flushed ; not because Mr. Drummond was looking at her so intently, but at certain thoughts that began to intrude themselves, which entwined themselves with the moonlighted cloisters.

‘ I was to have been there too, only at the

last moment I was prevented,' replied Archie; but his tone was inexplicable to the girl—it was at once so regretful and awe-struck. Good heavens! if he had met them, and been introduced to them in proper form! They had mentioned a Mr. Hamilton—well, Hamilton had been a pupil of his; he had coached him during a term. 'You know Hamilton?' he had said, staring at her; and then he wondered what Hamilton would say, if he came down to stay with him next vacation.

These reflections made him rather absent; and even when he took his leave, which was not until the falling dews and the glimmer of a late dusk drove Mrs. Challoner into the house, these thoughts still pursued him. Nothing else seemed to have taken so strong a hold on him as this.

'Good heavens!' he kept repeating to himself, 'to think the merest chance—just the incidental business of a friend—prevented him from occupying his old rooms during Commemoration! to think he might have met them in company with Hamilton and the other fellows!'

The sudden sense of disappointment—of

something lost and irremediable in his life; of wasted opportunities, of denied pleasure, came over the young man's mind. He could not have danced with Nan at the University ball, it is true; clergymen according to his creed must not dance. But there was the *fête* at Oriel, and the Magdalen concert, and the Long Walk in the Christchurch meadows, and doubtless other opportunities.

He never asked himself if these girls would have interested him so much if he had met them first in ordinary society; from the very first moment they had attracted him strangely. Had he only known them a fortnight? Good heavens! it seemed months, years, a lifetime! These revolutions of mind are not to be measured by time. It had come to this, that the late fellow of Oriel, so aristocratic in his tastes, so temperate in his likings, had entered certain devious paths, where hidden pitfalls and thorny enclosures warn the unwary traveller of unknown dangers, that he was walking, not blindfold, but by strongest will and intent, led by impulse like a mere boy, and not daring to raise his eyes to the future. 'And what Grace would have said!'

And for the first time in his life Archie felt that in this case he could not ask Grace's advice. He was loath to turn in at his own gate; but Mattie was standing there watching for him. She ran out into the road to meet him, and then he could see there were letters in her hand.

'Oh dear, Archie, I thought you were never coming home!' she exclaimed. 'And I have such news to tell you! There is a letter for you from Grace, and mother has written to me; and there is a note from Isabel inside, and she is engaged—really and truly engaged, to Mr. Ellis Burton; and the wedding is to be in six weeks, and you and I are to go down to it, and—oh dear——' Here Mattie broke down, and began to sob with excitement and pleasure and the longing for sympathy.

'Well, well, there is nothing to cry about!' returned Archie roughly; and then his manner changed and softened in spite of himself; for after all Isabel was his sister, and this was the first wedding in the family, and he could not hear such a piece of news unmoved. 'Let me hear all about it,' he said by-and-by;

and then he took poor hysterical little Mattie into the house and gave her some wine, and was very kind to her, and listened to his mother's letter and Isabel's gushing effusion without a single sneer. 'Poor little Belle, she does seem very happy!' he said, quite affectionately, as he turned up the lamp still more, and began Grace's letter.

Mattie sat and gazed at him in a sort of ecstasy; but she did not venture to ask him to read it to her. How nice he was to-night, and how handsome he looked! there never was such a brother as Archie. But suddenly, as though he were conscious of being watched, he sat down by the table, and shaded his face with his hand.

No. Mattie was right in her surmise; he would not have cared to show that letter to anyone.

The first sheet was all about Isabel. 'Dear little Isabel has just left me,' wrote Grace. 'The child looks so pretty in her new happiness, you would hardly know her. She has just been showing me the magnificent hoop of diamonds Ellis has given her. She says we must all call him Ellis now. "Chacun

à son goût." Poor Ellis is not very brilliant, certainly; I remember we used to call him clownish and uncultivated. But he has a good heart, and he is really very fond of Isabel; and, as she is satisfied, I suppose we need not doubt the wisdom of her choice. Mother is radiant, and makes so much of the little bride-elect that she declares her head is quite turned. The house is quite topsy-turvy with the excitement of this first wedding in the family. Isabel is very young to be married, and I tell mother six weeks is far too short for an engagement; but it seems Ellis will not listen to reason, and he has talked mother over. Perhaps I am rather fastidious, but, if I were Isabel, I should hate to receive my trousseau from my lover; and yet Ellis wants his mother to get everything for his *fiancée*. I believe there is to be a sort of compromise, and Mrs. Burton is to select heaps of pretty things—dresses and mantles and Paris bonnets. They are rolling in riches. Ellis has taken a large house in Sloane Square, and his father has bought him a landau and a splendid pair of horses; everything—furniture, plate, and ornaments—is to be as massive

and expensive as possible. If I were Isabel I should feel smothered by all these grand things, but the little lady takes it all quite coolly.

‘When I get a moment to myself I sit down and say, “In six weeks I shall see Archie!” Oh, my darling! this is almost too good news to be true! Only six weeks, and then I shall really see you! Now, do you know, I am longing for a good clearing-up talk, for your letters lately have not satisfied me at all. Perhaps I am growing fanciful, but I cannot help feeling as though something has come between us. The current of sympathy seems turned aside, somehow. No, do not laugh, or put me off with a jest, for I am really in earnest; and, but for fear of your scolding me, I should own to being just a little unhappy. Forgive me, Archie, if I vex you; but there is something, I am thoroughly convinced of that. You have some new interest or worry that you are keeping from me. Is this quite in accordance with our old compact, dear? Who are these Challoners Mattie mentions in her letters? She told me a strange rigmarole

about them the other day—that they were young ladies who had turned dressmakers. What an eccentric idea ! They must be very odd young ladies, I should think, to emancipate themselves so completely from all conventionalities. I wish they had not established themselves at Hadleigh, and so near the Vicarage. Mattie says you are so kind to them. Oh, Archie ! my dear brother ! do be careful ! I do not half like the idea of these girls ; they sound rash and designing, and you are so chivalrous in your notions. Why not let Mattie be kind to them instead of you ? In a parish like Hadleigh you need to be careful. Mother is calling me, so I will just close this with my fondest love.

‘ GRACE.’

Archie threw down the letter with a frown. For the first time he was annoyed with Grace.

Nan and her sisters rash and designing ! ‘ Odd young ladies !’ She was sorry they had established themselves at Hadleigh ! It was really too bad of Grace to condemn them in this fashion. But of course it must be Mattie’s fault ; she had written a pack of nonsense, exaggerating things as much as possible.

Poor Mattie would have had to have borne the brunt of his wrath as usual, only, as he turned to her with the frown black on his forehead, his eyes caught sight of her dress. Hitherto the room had been very dimly lighted ; but now, as he looked at her in the soft lamplight, his anger vanished in amazement.

‘Why, Mattie, what have you done to yourself? We are not expecting company this evening ; it is nearly ten o’clock.’

Mattie blushed and laughed, and then she actually bridled with pleasure.

‘Oh no, Archie ; of course not. I only put on my new dress just to see how it would fit ; and then I thought you might like to see it. It is the one uncle gave me ; and is it not beautifully made ? I am sure Mrs. Cheyne’s dresses never fit better. You and Grace may say what you like about the Challoners, but if they can make dresses like this, it would be tempting Providence not to use such a talent, and just because they were too fine ladies to work.’

‘I do believe you are right, Mattie,’ returned Archie, in a low voice ; ‘turn round

and let me look at you, girl. Do you mean—that she—that they made that?’

Mattie nodded as she slowly pivoted on one foot, and then revolved like the figures one used to see on old-fashioned barrel organs; then, as she stood still, she panted out the words:

‘Is it not just lovely, Archie?’ for in all the thirty years of her unassuming life Mattie had never had such a dress, so no wonder her head was a little turned.

‘Yes, indeed; I like it excessively,’ was Archie’s comment; and then he added, with the delicious frankness common to brothers, ‘It makes you look quite a different person, Mattie; you are almost nice-looking to-night.’

‘Oh, thank you, dear!’ cried poor Mattie, quite moved by this compliment; for if Archie thought her almost nice-looking, he must be pleased with her. Indeed, she even ventured to raise herself on tiptoe and kiss him in gratitude, which was taking a great liberty; only Archie bore it for once.

‘She really looked very well, poor little woman!’ thought Archie, when Mattie had at last exhausted her raptures, and bidden him

good-night. 'She would not be half so bad-looking, if some one would take her in hand and dress her properly. The women must be right after all, and there is a power in dress. Those girls do nothing by halves,' he continued, walking up and down the room. 'I would not have believed they had made it, if Mattie had not told me. "Rash and designing" indeed! just because they are not like other girls—because they are more natural, more industrious, more courageous, more religious in fact;' and then the young clergyman softly quoted to himself the words of the wise old King, words that Nan and her sisters had ever loved and sought to practise:

'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.'





CHAPTER X.

‘OH, YOU ARE PROUD!’

ON the following Monday morning Nan said in rather a curious voice to Phillis :

‘If no customers call to-day, our work-room will be empty. I wonder what we shall do with ourselves?’

To which Phillis replied without a moment’s hesitation :

‘We will go down and bathe, and Dulce and I will have a swimming-match ; and after that we will sit on the beach and quiz the people. Most likely there will be a troupe of coloured minstrels on the Parade, and that will be fun.’

‘Oh, I hope no one will come!’ observed

Dulce, overjoyed at the idea of a holiday; but seeing Nan's face was full of rebuke at this outburst of frivolity, she said no more.

It was decided at last that they should wait for an hour to see if any orders arrived, and after that they would consider themselves at liberty to amuse themselves for the remainder of the day. But, alas for Dulce's hopes! long before the appointed hour had expired, the gate-bell rang, and Miss Drummond made her appearance with a large paper parcel, which she deposited on the table with a radiant face.

The story was soon told. Her silk dress was such a success, and dear Archie was so charmed with it—here Mattie, with a blush, deposited a neatly sealed little packet in Nan's hand—that he had actually proposed that she should have another gown made after the same pattern for everyday wear. And he had taken her himself directly after breakfast down to Mordant's, and had chosen her this dress. He had never done such a thing before even for Grace, so no wonder Mattie was in the seventh heaven of delight.

'It is very pretty,' observed Nan critically;

'your brother has good taste.' Which speech was of course retailed to Archie.

Mattie had only just left the cottage, when another customer appeared in the person of Miss Middleton.

Nan, who had just begun her cutting-out, met her with a pleased glance of recognition ; and then, remembering her errand, bowed rather gravely. But Miss Middleton, after a moment's hesitation, held out her hand.

She had not been able to make up her mind about these girls. Her father's shocked sense of decorum, and her own old-fashioned gentlewoman's ideas had raised certain difficulties in her mind, which she had found it hard to overcome. 'Recollect, Elizabeth, I will not have those girls brought here,' the Colonel had said to her that very morning. 'They may be all very well in their way, but I have changed my opinion of them. There's poor Drummond—now mark my words, there will be trouble by-and-by in that quarter.' For Colonel Middleton had groaned in spirit ever since the morning he had seen the young Vicar walking with Phillis down the Briarwood Road, when she was carrying Mrs.

Trimmings's dress. Elizabeth answered this protest by one of her gentle smiles. 'Very well, dear father, I will ask no one to Brooklyn against your wish, you may be sure of that; but I suppose they may make my new dress? Mattie's has been such a success; they certainly understand their business.'

'You have a right to select your own dressmaker, Elizabeth,' returned the Colonel, with a frigid wave of his hand, for he had not got over his disappointment about the girls. 'I only warn you because you are very Quixotic in your notions; but we must take the world as we find it, and make the best of it; and there is your brother coming home by-and-by. We must be careful, for Hammond's sake;' and as Elizabeth's good sense owned the justice of her father's remark, there was nothing more said on the subject.

But it was not without a feeling of embarrassment that Miss Middleton entered the cottage; her great heart was yearning over these girls, whom she was compelled to keep at a distance. True, her father was right, Hammond was coming home, and a young

officer of seven-and-twenty was not to be trusted where three pretty girls were concerned; it would never do to invite them to Brooklyn or to make too much of them.

Miss Middleton had ranged herself completely on her father's side, but at the sight of Nan's sweet face and her grave little bow, she forgot all her prudent resolutions, and her hand was held out as though to an equal.

'I have come to ask you if you will be good enough to make me a dress,' she said, with a charming smile. 'You have succeeded so well with Miss Drummond that I cannot help wishing to have one too ;' and when she had said this she looked quietly round her, and surveyed the pretty workroom, and Dulce sitting at the sewing-machine, and lastly Phillis's bright, intelligent face, as she stood by the table turning over some fashion-books.

At that moment Mrs. Challoner entered the room with her little work-basket, and placed herself at the other window. Miss Middleton began talking to her at once, while Nan measured and pinned.

'I don't think I ever spent a pleasanter half-hour,' she told her father afterwards.

‘Mattie was right in what she said—they had made the work-room perfectly lovely with pictures and old china; and nothing could be nicer than their manners—so simple and unassuming, yet with a touch of independence too.’

‘And the old lady?’ inquired the Colonel maliciously, for he had seen Mrs. Challoner in church, and knew better than to speak of her so disrespectfully.

‘Old lady, father! why, she is not old at all. She is an exceedingly pleasing person, only a little stately in her manner; one would not venture to take a liberty with her. We had such a nice talk while the eldest daughter was fitting me. Is it not strange, father dear, that they know the Paines? and Mrs. Sartoris is an old acquaintance of theirs. I think they were a little sorry when they heard we knew them too, for the second girl coloured up so when I said Adelaide was your god-daughter.’

‘Humph! we will have Adelaide down here, and hear all about them,’ responded her father briskly.

‘Well, I don’t know; I am afraid that would be painful to them, under their changed cir-

cumstances. Just as we were talking about Adelaide, Miss Mewlstone came in ; and then they were so busy that I did not like to stay any longer. Ah, there is Mr. Drummond coming to interrupt us, as usual.'

And then the Colonel retailed all this for Archie's benefit. He had come in to glean a crumb or two of intelligence, if he could, about the Challoners' movements, and the Colonel's garrulity furnished him with a rich harvest.

Phillis had taken Miss Mewlstone in hand at once in the intervals of business ; she had inquired casually after Mrs. Cheyne's injured ankle.

'It is going on well—she can stand now,' returned Miss Mewlstone ; 'the confinement has been very trying for her, poor thing, and she looks sadly the worse for it. Don't take out those pins, my dear ; what is the good of taking so much pains with a fat old thing like me, and pricking your pretty fingers. Well, she is always asking me if I have seen any of you when I come home.'

'Mrs. Cheyne ask after us!' exclaimed Phillis, in a tone of astonishment.

'Ah, just so. She has not forgotten you.'

Magdalene never forgets anyone in whom she takes interest; not that she likes many people, poor dear! but then so few understand her. They will not believe that it is all on the surface, and that there is a good heart underneath.'

'You call her Magdalene,' observed Phillis rather curiously, looking up into Miss Mewlstone's placid face.

'Ah, just so; I forgot. You see, I knew her as a child. Oh, such a wee toddling mite! younger than dear little Janie. I remember her just as though it were yesterday; the loveliest little creature—prettier even than Janie!'

'Was Janie the little child who died?'

'Yes, the darling! She was just three years old; a perfect angel of a child! and Bertie was a year older. Poor Magdalene! it is no wonder she is as she is—no husband and children! When she sent for me I came at once, though I knew how it would be.'

'You knew how it would be?' repeated Phillis in a questioning voice, for Miss Mewlstone had come to a full stop here. She

looked a little confused at this repetition of her words.

'Oh, just so—just so.' Thank you, my dear. You have done that beautifully, I am sure. Never mind what an old woman says. When people are in trouble like that, they are often ill to live with. Magdalene has her moods—so have we all, my dear, though you are young to know that—but no one understands her better than her old Bathsheba; that is my name, and a funny old name too, is it not?' continued Miss Mewlstone, blinking at Phillis with her little blue eyes. 'The worst of having such a name is that no one will use it; even father and mother called me Barby, as Magdalene does sometimes still.'

Bathsheba Mewlstone! Phillis's lip curled with suppressed amusement. What a droll old thing she was! and yet she liked her, somehow.

'If she takes it into her head to come and see you, you will try and put up with her sharp speeches,' continued Miss Mewlstone a little anxiously, as she tied on her bonnet. Mr. Drummond does not understand her at

all ; and I will not deny that she is hard on the poor young man, and makes fun of him a bit—but, bless you, it is only her way ! She torments herself and other people, just because time will not pass quickly enough, and let her forget. If we had children ourselves we should understand it better, and how in Ramah there must be lamentation,' finished Miss Mewlstone, with a vague and peculiar reference to the martyred innocents which was rather inexplicable to Phillis, as in this case there was certainly no Herod, but an ordinary visitation of Providence ; but then she did not know that Miss Mewlstone was often a little vague.

After this hint, Phillis was not greatly surprised when, one morning, a pair of gray ponies stopped before the Friary, and Mrs. Cheyne's tall figure came slowly up the flagged path.

It must be owned that Phillis's first feelings were not wholly pleasurable. Nan had gone out ; an invalid lady staying at Seaview Cottage had sent for a dressmaker rather hurriedly, and Miss Milner had of course recommended them. Nan had gone at once,

and as Dulce looked pale, she had taken her with her for a walk. They might not be back for another hour; a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Cheyne after their last interview was rather formidable.

Dorothy preceded her with a parcel, which she deposited rather gingerly on the table. As Mrs. Cheyne entered the room she looked at Phillis in a cool, off-hand manner.

'I am come on business,' she said, with a little nod. 'How do you do, Miss Challoner? you are looking rather pale, I think;' and then her keen glance travelled round the room.

The girl flushed a little over this abruptness, but she did not lose her courage.

'Is this the dress?' she asked, opening the parcel; but her fingers would tremble a little, in spite of her will. And then as the rich folds of the black brocade came into view, she asked, in a business-like tone, in what style Mrs. Cheyne would wish it made, and how soon she required it. To all of which Mrs. Cheyne responded in the same dry curt manner; and then the usual process of fitting began.

Never had her task seemed so tedious and distasteful to Phillis. Even Mrs. Trimmings was preferable to this; she hardly ventured to raise her eyes for fear of meeting Mrs. Cheyne's cold, satirical glance; and yet all the time she knew she was being watched. Mrs. Cheyne's vigilant silence meant something.

If only her mother would come in; but she was shelling peas for Dorothy. To think Nan should have failed her on such an occasion! even Dulce would have been a comfort, though she was so easily frightened. She started almost nervously when Mrs. Cheyne at last broke the silence.

'Yes, you are decidedly paler—a little thinner, I think, and that after only a fortnight's work.'

Phillis looked up a little indignantly at this; but she found Mrs. Cheyne was regarding her not unkindly.

'I am well enough,' she returned, rather ungraciously; 'but we are not used to so much confinement, and the weather is hot; we shall grow accustomed to it in time.'

'You think restlessness is so easily subdued?' with a sneer.

'No; but I believe it can be controlled,' replied poor Phillis, who suffered more than anyone guessed from this restraint on her sweet freedom.

Mrs. Cheyne was right; even in this short time she was certainly paler and thinner.

'You mean to persevere, then, in your moral suicide?'

'We mean to persevere in our duty,' corrected Phillis, as she pinned up a sleeve.

'Rather a high moral tone for a dress-maker to take; don't you think so?' returned Mrs. Cheyne, in the voice Archie hated. The woman certainly had a double nature—there was a twist in her somewhere.

This was too much for Phillis; she fired up in a moment.

'Why should not dressmakers take a high moral tone? You make me feel glad I am one when you talk like that. This is our ambition—Nan's and mine, for Dulce is too young to think much about it—to show by our example that there is no degradation in work. Oh, it is hard! First Mr. Drummond

comes, and talks to us as though we were doing wrong ; and then you, to cry down our honest labour, and call it suicide. Is it suicide to work with these hands that God has made clever, for my mother ?' cried Phillis ; and her great gray eyes filled up with sudden tears.

Mrs. Cheyne did not look displeased at the girl's outburst. If she had led up to this point, she could not have received it more calmly.

'There, there ! you need not excite yourself, child !' she said more gently ; ' I only wanted to know what you would say. So Miss Mewlstone has been to you, I hear—and Miss Middleton, too ? but that's her benevolence. Of course Miss Mattie comes out of curiosity. How I do detest a fussy woman, with a tongue that chatters faster than a purling brook ! What do you say ? No harm in her ?' for Phillis had muttered something to this effect. 'Oh, that is negative praise ! I like people to have a little harm in them ; it is so much more amusing.'

'I cannot say I am of your opinion,' returned Phillis coldly ; she was rather ashamed

of her fit of enthusiasm, and cross in consequence.

'My dear, I always thought Lucifer must have been rather an interesting person;' then, as Phillis looked scandalized, and drew herself up, she said in a funny voice: 'Now don't tell your mother what I said, or she will think me an improper character; and I want to be introduced to her.'

'You want to be introduced to my mother!' Phillis could hardly believe her ears. Certainly Mrs. Cheyne was a most inexplicable person.

'Dressmakers don't often have mothers—do they?' returned Mrs. Cheyne, with a laugh; 'at least, they are never on view. I suppose they are in the back premises doing something?'

'Shelling peas, for example,' replied Phillis, roused to mischief by this; 'that is mother's work this morning. Dorothy is old and single-handed, and needs all the help we can give her. Oh yes! I will take you to her at once.'

'Indeed you must not, if it will inconvenience her!' returned Mrs. Cheyne, drawing

back a little at this. She was full of curiosity to see the mother of these singular girls, but she did not wish to have her illusion too roughly dispelled; and the notion of Mrs. Challoner's homely employment grated a little on the feelings of the fine lady, who had never done anything useful in her life.

'Oh, nothing puts mother out!' returned Phillis, in an indifferent tone. The old spirit of fun was waking up in her, and she led the way promptly to the parlour.

'Mother, Mrs. Cheyne wishes to see you,' she announced in a most matter-of-fact voice, as though that lady were a daily visitor.

Mrs. Challoner looked up in a little surprise. One of Dorothy's rough aprons was tied over her nice black gown, and the yellow earthenware bowl was on her lap. Phillis took up some of the green pods, and began playing with them.

'Will you excuse my rising?—you see my employment,' observed Mrs. Challoner, with a smile that was almost as charming as Nan's; and she held out a white soft hand to her visitor.

The perfect ease of her manner, the absence

of all flurry, produced an instant effect on Mrs. Cheyne. For a moment she stood as though at a loss to explain her intrusion ; but the next minute one of her rare sunshiny smiles crossed her face.

'I must seem impertinent—but your daughters have interested me so much that I was anxious to see their mother. But I ought to apologize for disturbing you so early.'

'Not at all ; all hours are the same to me. We are always glad to see our friends—are we not, Phillis ? My dear, I wish you would carry these away to Dorothy, and ask her to finish them.'

'Oh no—pray do nothing of the kind,' returned Mrs. Cheyne eagerly. 'You must not punish me in this way—let me help you. Indeed, I am sure I can, if I only tried ;' and to Phillis's intense amusement, Mrs. Cheyne drew off her delicate French gloves, and in another moment both ladies were seated close together shelling peas into the same pan, and talking as though they had known each other for years.

'Oh, it was too delicious!' exclaimed

Phillis, when she had retailed this interview for Nan's and Dulce's benefit. 'I knew mother would behave beautifully. If I had taken the Princess of Wales in to see her, she would not have had a word of apology for her apron, though it was a horrid coarse thing of Dorothy's. She would just have smiled at her, as she did at Mrs. Cheyne. Mother's behaviour is always lovely.

'Darling old mammie!' put in Dulce rapturously, at this point.

'I made some excuse and left them together, because I could see Mrs. Cheyne was dying to get rid of me; and I am always amiable, and like to please people. Oh, it was the funniest sight, I assure you! Mrs. Cheyne with her long fingers blazing with diamond rings, and the peas rolling down her silk dress; and mother just going on with her business in her quiet way. Oh, I had such a laugh when I was back in the work-room!'

It cost Phillis some trouble to be properly demure when Mrs. Cheyne came into the workroom some time afterwards in search of her. Perhaps her mischievous eyes betrayed

her, for Mrs. Cheyne shook her head at her in pretended rebuke.

'Ah, I see—you will persist in treating things like a comedy. Well, that is better than putting on tragedy airs, and making yourselves miserable. Now I have seen your mother, I am not quite so puzzled.'

'Indeed!' and Phillis fixed her eyes innocently on Mrs. Cheyne's face.

'No; but I am not going to make you vain by telling you what I think of her—in-discriminate praise is not wholesome. Now, when are you coming to see me?—that is the point in question.'

'Dorothy will bring home your dress on Saturday,' replied Phillis, a little drily. 'If it requires alteration perhaps you will let me know, and of course I will come up to the White House at any time.'

'But I do not mean to wait for that; you are misunderstanding me purposely, Miss Challoner. I want you to come and talk to me one evening—any evening. No one but Miss Mewlstone will be there.'

'Oh no!' responded Phillis, suddenly turning very red; 'I do not think that would do

at all, Mrs. Cheyne. I do not mean to be rude or ungrateful for your kindness, but—but——’ Here the girl stammered and broke down.

‘You wish, then, to confine our intercourse to a purely business relation?’ asked Mrs. Cheyne, and her voice had a tone of the old bitterness.

‘Would it not be better, under the circumstances? Forgive me if I am too proud, but——’

‘Oh, you are proud, terribly proud!’ returned Mrs. Cheyne, taking up her words before she could complete her sentence. ‘You owe me a grudge for what I said that night, and now you are making me pay the penalty. Well, I am not meek; there is not a human being living to whom I would sue for friendship. If I were starving for a kind word, I would sooner die than ask for one. You see, I am proud too, Miss Challoner.’

‘Oh, I did not mean to hurt you,’ returned Phillis, distressed at this, but determined not to yield an inch, or bend to the sudden caprice of this extraordinary woman, who had made her suffer so once.

'To be hurt, one must have feelings,' returned this singular person. 'Do not be afraid, I shall not attempt to shake your resolution; if you come to me now it must be of your own free will.'

'And if I come, what then?' asked Phillis, standing very straight and stiff, for she would not be patronized.

'If you come you will be welcome,' returned Mrs. Cheyne; and then, with a grave inclination of the head, she swept out of the room.





CHAPTER XI.

A DARK HOUR.

I SHOULD go one evening, if I were you ; it is easy to see that Mrs. Cheyne has taken a fancy to you,' said Nan, who was much interested by this recital, but to this Phillis only replied by a very decided shake of the head.

'I shall do nothing of the kind ; I was not made to be a fine lady's *protégée*. If she patronized me, I should grow savage and show my teeth, and as I have no desire to break the peace, we had better remain strangers. Dear Magdalene certainly has a temper !' finished Phillis, with a wicked little sneer.

Nan tried to combat this resolution, and used a great many arguments ; she was

anxious that Phillis should avail herself of this sudden fancy on the part of Mrs. Cheyne to lift herself and perhaps all of them into society with their equals. Nan's good sense told her that though at present the novelty and excitement of their position prevented them from realizing the full extent of their isolation, in time it must weigh on them very heavily, and especially on Phillis, who was bright and clever, and liked society; but all her words were powerless against Phillis's stubbornness—to the White House she could not and would not go.

But one evening she changed her mind very suddenly, when a note from Miss Mewlstone reached her. A gardener's boy brought it; 'it was very particular, and was to be delivered immediate to the young lady,' he observed, holding the missive between a very grimy finger and thumb.

'MY DEAR YOUNG LADY (it began),—

'Pride is all very well, but charity is often best in the long run, and a little kindness to a suffering human being is never out of place in a young creature like you.

‘Poor Magdalene has been very sadly for days, and I have got it into my stupid old head—that is always fancying things—that she has been watching for folks who have been too proud to come, though she would die sooner than tell me so; but that is her way, poor dear!’

‘It is ill to wake at nights with nothing but sad thoughts for company, and it is ill wearing out the long days with only a silly old body to cheer one up; and when there is nothing fresh to say, and nothing to expect, and not a footstep or a voice to break the silence, then it seems to me that a young voice—that is a kind voice—would be welcome. Take this hint, my dear, and keep my counsel, for I am only a silly old woman, as she often says.

‘Yours,

‘BATHSHEBA MEWLSTONE.’

‘Oh, I must go now!’ observed Phillis, in an embarrassed voice, as she laid this singular note before Nan.

‘Yes, dear; and you had better put on your hat at once, and Dulce and I will walk

with you as far as the gate. It is sad for you to miss the scramble on the shore ; but when other people really want us, I feel as though it were a direct call,' finished Nan solemnly.

'I am afraid there is a storm coming up,' replied Phillis, who had been oppressed all day by the heavy thundery atmosphere ; she had looked so heated and weary that Nan had proposed a walk by the shore. Work was pouring upon them from all sides : the townspeople, envious of Mrs. Trimmings's stylish new dress, were besieging the Friary with orders, and the young dressmakers would have been literally overwhelmed with their labours ; only Nan, with admirable foresight, insisted on only taking in as much work as they felt themselves able to complete.

'No,' she would say to some disappointed customer, 'our hands are full just now, and we cannot undertake any more orders at present ; we will not promise more than we can perform. Come to me again in a fortnight's time, and we will willingly make your dress, but now it is impossible ;' and in most cases the dress was brought punctually at the time appointed.

Phillis used to grumble a little at this.

‘You ought not to refuse orders, Nan,’ she said, rather fretfully once. ‘Any other dress-maker would sit up half the night rather than disappoint a customer.’

‘My dear,’ Nan returned, in her elder-sisterly voice, which had always a great effect on Phillis, ‘I wonder what use Dulce and you would be if you sat up sewing half the night, and drinking strong tea to keep yourselves awake? No, there shall be no burning the candles at both ends in this fashion; please God we will keep our health, and our customers, and no one in their senses could call us idle. Why, we are quite the fashion! Mrs. Squails told me yesterday that everyone in Hadleigh was wild to have a gown made by the “lady dressmakers.”’

‘Oh, I dare say!’ replied Phillis crossly, for the poor thing was so hot and tired that she could have cried from pure weariness and vexation of spirit. ‘But we shall not be the fashion long when the novelty wears off; people will call us independent, and get tired of us—and no wonder, if they are to wait for their dresses in this way.’

Nan's only answer was to look at Phillis's pale face in a pitying way ; and then she took her hand, and led her to the corner, where her mother's Bible always lay, and then with ready fingers turned to the well-known passage : ' Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour unto the evening.'

' Well, Nan, what then ?'

' Evening is for rest—for refreshment of mind and body ; I will not have it turned into a time of toil. I know you, Phillis ; you would work till your poor fingers got thin, and your spirits were all flattened out, and every nerve was jarring and set on edge ; and you would call that duty ! No, darling—never. Dulce shall keep her roses, and we will have battledore and shuttlecock every evening ; but if I have to keep the key of the work-room in my pocket, you and Dulce shall never enter it after tea ;' and Nan's good sense, as usual, carried the day.

Phillis would much rather have joined her sisters in their walk than turned in at the gloomy lodge-gates.

' "All ye who enter here leave hope behind,"'

she quoted softly, as she waved her hand to Nan.

The servant who admitted her looked a little dubious over his errand.

‘His mistress was in her room,’ he believed, ‘and was far too unwell to see visitors. He would tell Miss Mewlstone, if the young lady liked to wait, but he was sure it was no use’—all very civilly said. And as Phillis persisted in her intention of seeing Mrs. Cheyne, if possible, he ushered her into the library, a gloomy-looking room, with closed blinds, one of which he drew up, and then went in search of Miss Mewlstone.

Phillis did not find her surroundings particularly cheerful. The air was darkened by the approaching storm. A sullen cloud hung over the sky. The library windows opened upon the shrubberies. Here the trees were planted so thickly that their shade obscured much of the light. The room was so dark she could only dimly discern the handsome bindings of the books in the carved oak book-cases. The whole of the furniture seemed sombre and massive. The chair that the footman had placed for her was covered with

violet velvet, and was in harmony with the rest of the furniture.

Dreary as the room looked, it was nothing to the shrubby walk. A narrow winding path seemed to vanish into utter darkness. In some places the trees met over-head, so closely had they grown.

‘If I were the mistress of the White House,’ Phillis said to herself, ‘I would cut every one of those trees down. They must make this part of the house quite unhealthy. It really looks like a “ghost walk” that one reads about.’ But scarcely had these thoughts passed through her mind, when she uttered a faint cry of alarm. The dark room, the impending storm, and her own overwrought feelings were making her nervous; but actually, through the gloom, she could see a figure in white approaching.

In another moment she would have sought refuge in the hall, but contempt at her own cowardice kept her rooted to the spot.

‘She was an utter goose to be so startled! It was—yes, of course—it was Mrs. Cheyne. She could see her more plainly now. She would step through the window and meet her.’

Phillis's feelings of uneasiness had not quite vanished. The obscurity was confusing, and invested everything with an unnatural effect. Even Mrs. Cheyne's figure, coming out from the dark background, seemed strange and unfamiliar. Phillis had always before seen her in black ; but now she wore a white gown, fashioned loosely, like a wrapper ; and her hair, which at other times had been most carefully arranged, was now strained tightly and unbecomingly from her face, which looked pallid and drawn. She started violently when she saw Phillis coming towards her, and seemed inclined to draw back and retrace her steps. It evidently cost her a strong effort to recover herself. She seemed to conquer her reluctance with difficulty.

' So you have come at last, Miss Challoner,' she said, fixing her eyes, which looked unnaturally bright, on Phillis. Her voice was cold, almost harsh, and her countenance expressed no pleasure. The hand she held out was so limp and cold that Phillis relinquished it hastily.

' You said that I should be welcome,' she faltered, and trying not to appear alarmed.

She was too young and healthy to understand the meaning of the word hysteria, or to guess at the existence of nervous maladies that make some people's lives a long torment to them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Cheyne's singular aspect filled her with vague fear. It did not enter into her mind to connect the coming storm with Mrs. Cheyne's condition, until she hinted at it herself.

'Oh yes, you are welcome,' she responded wearily. 'I have looked for you evening after evening, but you chose to come with the storm. It is a pity, perhaps, but then you did not know!'

'What would you have me know?' asked Phillis timidly.

Mrs. Cheyne shrugged her shoulders a little flightily.

'Oh, you are young!' she returned; 'you do not understand what nerves mean—you sleep sweetly of a night, and have no bad dreams—it does not matter to you happy people if the air is full of sunshine or surcharged with electricity. For me, when the sun ceases to shine I am in despair. Fogs find me brooding. An impending storm

suffocates, and yet tears me to pieces with restlessness ; it drives me hither and thither like a fallen leaf. I tire myself that I may sleep, and yet I stare open-eyed for hours together into the darkness. I wonder sometimes I do not go mad. But there, let us walk—let us walk,’ and she made a movement to retrace her steps, but Phillis, with a courage for which she commended herself afterwards, pulled her back by her hanging sleeves.

‘ Oh, not there ! it is not good for any one who is sad to walk in that dark place. No wonder your thoughts are sombre. Look ! the heavy raindrops are pattering among the leaves. I do not care to get wet ; let us go back to the house.’

‘ Pshaw ! what does it matter getting wet ?’ she returned, with a little scorn ; but, nevertheless, she suffered Phillis to take her arm, and draw her gently towards the house. Only as they came near the library-window, she pointed to it indignantly. ‘ Who has dared to enter that room, or open the window ? Have I not forbidden over and over again that that room should be used ? Do you think,’ she continued, in the same excited

way, 'that I would enter that room to-night of all nights? Why, I should hear his angry voice pealing in every corner! It was a good room for echoes; and he could speak loudly if he chose. Come away! there is a door I always use that leads to my private apartments. I am no recluse; but, in these moods, I do not care to show myself to people. If you are not afraid, you may come with me, unless you prefer Miss Mewlstone's company.'

'I would rather come with you,' returned Phillis gently. She could not in truth say she was not afraid; but, all the same, she must try and soothe the poor creature, who was evidently enduring such torments of mind; so she followed in silence up the broad oak staircase.

A green-baize door admitted them into a long and somewhat narrow corridor, lighted up by a row of high narrow windows, set prettily with flower-boxes. Here there were several doors. Mrs. Cheyne paused before one a moment.

'Look here! you shall see the mysteries of the west wing. This is my world; down-

stairs I am a different creature—taciturn, harsh, and prone to sarcasm. Ask Mr. Drummond what he thinks of me; but I never could endure a good young man—especially that delicious compound of the worldling and the saint—like the Reverend Archibald. See here, my dear, here I am never captious, or say naughty things!’

She threw open the door, and softly beckoned to Phillis to enter. It was a large empty room—evidently a nursery. Some canaries were twittering faintly in a gilded cage. There were flowers in the two windows, and in the vases on the table; evidently some loving hands had arranged them that very morning. A large rocking-horse occupied the centre of the floor; a doll lay with its face downwards on the crimson carpet; a pile of wooden soldiers strutted on their zig-zag platform—one or two had fallen off; a torn picture-book had been flung beside them.

‘That was my Janie’s picture-book,’ said Mrs. Cheyne mournfully; ‘she was teaching her doll out of it just before she was taken ill. Nothing was touched; by a sort of inspiration—a foreboding—I do not know what,

I bade nurse leave the toys as they were. "It is only an interrupted game; let the darlings find their toys as they put them," I said to her that morning. Look at the soldiers! Bertie was always for soldiers—bless him!

Her manner had grown calmer; and she spoke with such touching tenderness, that tears came to Phillis's eyes. But Mrs. Cheyne never once looked at the girl; she lingered by the table a moment, adjusting a leaf here and a bud there in the bouquets, and then she opened an inner door leading to the night-nursery. Here the associations were still more harrowing. The cots stood side by side under a muslin canopy, with an alabaster angel between them; the little night-dresses lay folded on the pillows; on each quilt was the scarlet dressing-gown and pair of tiny slippers; the clothes were piled neatly on two chairs—a boy's velvet tunic on one, a girl's white frock, a little limp and discoloured, hung over the rails of the other.

'Everything just the same!' murmured the poor mother. 'Look here, my dear'—with a faint smile—'these are Bertie's slippers—'

there is the hole he kicked in them when he was in his tempers, for my boy had the Cheyne temper. He was Herbert's image—his very image.' She sighed—paused, and went on. 'Every night I come and sit beside their beds, and then the darlings come to me. I can see their faces—oh, so plainly, and hear their voices. "Good-night, dear mamma!" they seem to say to me, only Bertie's voice is always the louder.'

Her manner was becoming a little excited again; only Phillis took her hand and pressed it gently, and the touch seemed to soothe her like magic.

'I am so glad you come here every night,' she said in her sweet serious voice, from which every trace of fear had gone. 'I think that a beautiful idea, to come and say your prayers beside one of these little beds.'

'To say my prayers—I pray beside my darlings' beds!' exclaimed Mrs. Cheyne, in a startled voice. 'Oh no—I never do that. God would not hear such prayers as mine—never—never!'

'Dear Mrs. Cheyne, why not?' She moved restlessly away at the question, and tried to

disengage herself from Phillis's firm grasp. 'The Divine Father hears all prayers,' whispered the girl.

'All?—but not mine—not mine, or I should not be sitting here alone. Do you know my husband left me in anger—that his last words to me were the bitterest he ever spoke? "Good-bye, Magdalene; you have made my life so wretched that I do not care if I never live to set foot in this house again!" And that to me—his wedded wife and the mother of his children—who loved him so. Oh, Herbert—Herbert!' and covering her face, the unhappy woman suddenly burst into a passion of tears.





CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

PHILLIS kept a sad silence ; not for worlds would she have checked the flow of tears that must have been so healing to the tortured brain. Besides, what was there that she, so young and inexperienced, could say in the presence of a grief so terrible, so overpowering ? The whole thing was inexplicable to Phillis. Why were the outworks of conventionality so suddenly thrown down ? Why was she, a stranger, permitted to be a witness of such a revelation ? As she sat there speechless and sympathizing, a faint sound reached her ear—the rustle of a dress in the adjoining room—footsteps that approached warily, and then paused ; a moment

afterwards the door closed softly behind them. Phillis looked round quickly, but could see nothing; and the same instant a peal of thunder rolled over their heads.

Mrs. Cheyne started up with an hysterical scream, and caught hold of Phillis. 'Come,' she said, almost wildly, 'we will not stay here. The children will not come to-night, for who could hear their voices in such a storm? My little angels!—but they shall not see me like this. Come, come!' and, taking the girl by the arm, she almost dragged her from the room, and led the way with rapid and disordered footsteps to a large luxurious chamber, furnished evidently as a dressing-room, and only divided from the sleeping room by a curtained archway.

As Mrs. Cheyne threw herself down in an armchair and hid her face in her hands, the curtain was drawn back, and Miss Mewlstone came in with an anxious, almost a frightened expression on her good-natured countenance. She hurried up to Mrs. Cheyne, and took her in her arms as though she were a child.

'Now, Magdalene—now, my dear,' she

said coaxingly, 'you will try to be good and command yourself before this young lady. Look at her, she is not a bit afraid of the storm—are you, Miss Challoner? No, just so; you are far too sensible.'

'Oh, that is what you always tell me,' returned Mrs. Cheyne, wrenching herself free with some violence. 'Be sensible—be good, when I am nearly mad with the oppression and suffocation, here, and here,' pointing to her head and breast. 'Commonplaces, commonplaces; as well stop a deluge with a tea-cup. Oh, you are an old fool, Barby you will never learn wisdom.'

'My poor lamb! Barby never minds one word you say when you are like this.'

'Oh, I will beg your pardon to-morrow, or when the thunder stops. Hark! there it is again,' cowering down in her chair. 'Can't you pray for it to cease, Barby? Oh, it is too horrible! Don't you recollect the night he rode away—right into the storm, into the very teeth of the storm? "Good-bye, Magdalene; who knows when we may meet again?" and I never looked at him, never kissed him, never broke the silence by one word; and the thunder

came, and he was gone,' beating the air with her hands.

'Oh, hush, my dear—hush! Let me read to you a little, and the fever will soon pass. You are frightening the poor young lady with your wild talk, and no wonder!'

'Pshaw! who minds the girl? Let her go or stop; what do I care? What is the whole world to me, when I am tormented like this? Three years, four years—more than a thousand days of this misery! Oh, Barby! do you think I have been punished enough? do you think where he is, up in heaven with the children, that he forgives and pities me, who was such a bad wife to him?'

As Miss Mewlstone paused a moment to wipe the tears that were flowing over her old cheeks, Phillis's voice came to her relief.

'Oh, can you doubt it?' she said, in much agitation. 'Dear Mrs. Cheyne, can you have an instant's doubt? Do you think the dead carry all these paltry earthly feelings into the bright place yonder? Forgive you—oh, there is no need of forgiveness there; he will only be loving you—he and the children too.'

‘God bless you!’ whispered Miss Mewlstone. ‘Hush, that is enough! Go, my dear—go, and I will come to you presently! Magdalene, put your poor head down here; I have thought of something that will do you good.’ She waved Phillis away almost impatiently, and laid the poor sufferer’s head on her bosom, shielding it from the flashes that darted through the room. Phillis could see her bending over her, and her voice was as tender as though she were soothing a sick infant.

Phillis was trembling with agitation as she stole down the dark corridor. Never in her happy young life had she witnessed or imagined such a scene. The wild words, the half-maddened gestures, the look of agony stamped on the pale, almost distorted features, would haunt her for many a day. Oh, how the poor soul must have suffered before she lost self-control and balance like this!

It was not the death of her children that had so utterly unnerved her. It must have been that bitter parting with her husband, and the remembrance of angry words never to

be atoned for in this life, that was cankering the root of her peace, and that brought about these moods of despair.

Phillis thought of Coleridge's lines—

‘And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness on the brain,’

as she took refuge in the dim drawing-room. Here, at least, there were signs of human life and occupation. A little tea-table had been set in one window, though the tea was cold. The greyhounds came and laid their slender noses on her gown, and one small Italian one coiled himself up on her lap. Miss Mewlstone's work-basket stood open, and a tortoise-shell kitten had helped itself to a ball of wool, and was busily unwinding it. The dogs were evidently frightened at the storm, for they all gathered round Phillis, shivering and whining, as though missing their mistress; and she had much ado to comfort them, though she loved animals and understood their dumb language better than most people.

It was not so very long, and yet it seemed hours before Miss Mewlstone came down to her.

‘Are you here, my dear?’ she asked in a loud whisper, for the room was dark. ‘Ah, just so. We must have lights, and I must give you a glass of wine or a nice hot cup of coffee;’ and notwithstanding Phillis’s protest that she never took wine, and was not in need of anything, Miss Mewlstone rang the bell, and desired the footman to bring in the lamp. ‘And tell Bishop to send up some nice hot coffee and sandwiches as soon as possible. For young people never know what they want, and you are just worried and tired to death with all you have gone through—not being an old woman and seasoned to it like me,’ went on the good creature, and she patted Phillis’s cheek encouragingly as she spoke.

‘But how is she? Oh, thank God the storm has lulled at last!’ exclaimed the girl breathlessly.

‘Oh yes; the storm is over. We have reason to dread storms in this house,’ returned Miss Mewlstone gravely. ‘She was quite exhausted, and let Charlotte and me help her to bed. Now she has had her composing-draught, and Charlotte will sit by

her till I go up. I always watch by her all night after one of these attacks.'

'Is it a nervous attack?' asked Phillis timidly, for she felt she was treading on delicate ground.

'I believe Dr. Parkes calls it hysteria,' replied Miss Mewlstone, hesitating a little. 'Ah, we have sad times with her. You heard what she said, poor dear—she has been sorely tried.'

'Was not her husband good to her, then?'

'I am sure he meant to be kind,' returned Miss Mewlstone sorrowfully, 'for he loved her dearly; but he was passionate and masterful, and was one that would have his way. As long as it was only courtship, he worshipped the ground she walked upon, as the saying is. But poor Magdalene was not a good wife. She was cold when she ought to have been caressing—stubborn when she might have yielded; and sarcasm never yet healed a wound. Ah, here comes your coffee! Thank you, Evans. Now, my dear, you must just eat and drink, and put some colour into those pale cheeks. Scenes like these are not good

for young creatures like you. But when Magdalene is in these moods, she would not care if the whole world listened to her. To-morrow she will be herself, and remember and be ashamed; and then you must not mind if she be harder and colder than ever. She will say bitter things all the more, because she is angered at her own want of self-control.'

'I can understand that—that is just as I should feel,' returned Phillis, shuddering a little at the idea of encountering Mrs. Cheyne's keen-edged sarcasms. 'She will not like to see me any more; she will think I had no right to witness such a scene.'

'It is certainly a pity that I wrote that note,' returned Miss Mewlstone reflectively. 'I hoped that you would turn her thoughts, and that we might avert the usual nervous paroxysm. When I opened the door and saw you sitting together so peacefully beside the children's beds, I expected a milder mood; but it was the thunder. Poor Magdalene! she has never been able to control herself in a storm since the evening Herbert left her, and we went in and found her lying insensible

in the library, in the midst of one of the worst storms I have ever witnessed.'

'That was when he said those cruel words to her!' ejaculated Phillis.

'Yes. Did she repeat them? how often I have begged her to forget them, and to believe that he repented of them before an hour was over! Ah, well! the sting of death lies in this—if she had had one word, one little word, she would be a different woman in spite of the children's death. God's strokes are less cruel than men's strokes; the reed may be bruised by them, but not broken. She had a long illness after the children were gone; it was too much—too much for any woman's heart to bear. You see, she wanted her husband to comfort her. Dr. Parkes feared for her brain, but we pulled her through. Ah, just so, my dear; we pulled her through!' finished Miss Mewlstone, with a sigh.

'Oh, how good you are to her! she is happy to have such a friend!' observed Phillis enthusiastically.

Miss Mewlstone shook her head, and a tear rolled down her face.

'Oh, my dear, I am only an old fool, as

she said just now. And, after all, the company of a stupid old woman is not much to a proud bonnie creature like that. Sometimes for days together she hardly opens her lips to me; we sit together, eat together, drive together, and not a word for Barby. But sometimes, poor dear! she will cling to me and cry, and say her heart is breaking. And Solomon was right; but it was not only a brother that is good for adversity. When she wants me, I am here; and there is nothing I will not do for her, and she knows it—and that is about the long and short of it,' finished Miss Mewlstone, dismissing the subject with another sigh. And then she bade Phillis finish her coffee, and put on her hat. 'For your mother will be expecting you, and wondering what has become of you; and Phillips or Evans must walk with you, for it is past nine o'clock, and such a pretty young lady must not go unattended,' concluded the simple woman.

Phillis laughed and kissed her at this; but though she said nothing of her intentions, she determined to dismiss the servant as soon as possible, and run on alone to the Friary.

She had not forgotten her encounter with Mr. Drummond on her last visit to the White House; but to-night the storm would keep him indoors.

Evans, the new footman, was desired to escort her; but, in the middle of the avenue, Phillis civilly dismissed him.

‘There is no need for two of us to get wet; and the rain is coming on very heavily,’ she said.

The young man hesitated; but he was slow-witted and new to his duty, and the young lady had a peremptory way with her, so he touched his hat, and went back to the house.

‘Such nonsense, having a liveried servant at my heels, when I am only a dressmaker!’ thought Phillis, scurrying down the avenue like a chased rabbit.

Hitherto, the trees had sheltered her; but a glance at the open road and the driving rain made her resolve to take refuge in the porch of the cottage that stood opposite the gate. It was the place where Nan and her mother had once lodged; and, though all the lights were extinguished, and the people had retired to bed, she felt a comfortable sense of

safety as she unlatched the little gate. Not even Mr. Drummond would discover her there.

But Phillis's satisfaction was of short duration ; the foolish girl was soon to repent of her foolhardiness in dismissing her escort. She little knew that her words to Evans had been overheard, and that behind the dripping shrubberies she had been watched and followed. Scarcely had she taken refuge under the green porch, and placed her wet umbrella to dry, before she heard the latch of the little gate unclosed, and a tall dark figure come up the gravel-walk. It was not Isaac Williams's portly form—she could discern that in the darkness—and, for the moment, a thrill of deadly terror came upon the incautious girl ; but the next minute her natural courage returned to her aid. The porch was just underneath the room where Isaac slept ; a call of ' help ' would reach him at once ; there was no reason for this alarm at all. Nevertheless, she shrank back a little as the stranger came directly towards her, then paused as though in some embarrassment.

' Pardon me, but you have poor shelter

here. I am Mrs. Williams's lodger. I could easily let you into the cottage. I am afraid the rain comes through the trellis-work.'

Phillis's heart gave a great thump of relief. In the first place, Mrs. Williams' lodger must be a respectable person, and no dangerous loafer or pickpocket ; in the second place, the refined cultured tones of the stranger pleased her ear. Phillis had a craze on this point. ' You may be deceived in a face, but in a voice, never !' she would say ; and as she told Nan afterwards, the moment that voice greeted her in the darkness she felt no further fear.

' I have a dry corner here,' she returned quietly ; ' it is only a thunder-shower, and I am close to home—only down the road, and just round the corner, past the Vicarage.'

' Past the Vicarage !' in a tone of surprise ; ' why, there are no houses there !'

' There is a very small one called the Friary,' returned Phillis, feeling herself colour in the darkness, as she mentioned their humble abode.

There was no answer for a moment, and then her mysterious neighbour continued :

' My good landlord seems to retire early ; the whole place looks deserted. They are very

early risers, and perhaps that is the reason. If you will allow me to pass, I will open the door and kindle a lamp in my little parlour. Even if you prefer to remain in the porch, it will look more cheerful ;' and without waiting for her reply he took a key from his pocket, and let himself into the house.

Their voices had disturbed the owners of the cottage, and Phillis overheard the following colloquy :

' Dear sakes alive ! what a frightful storm ! Is there anything you want, Mr. Dancy ?' in Mrs. Williams's shrill tones.

' Not for myself, Mrs. Williams ; but there is a young lady sheltering in the porch. I should be glad if you could come down and make her a little comfortable. The floodgates of heaven seem open to-night.'

' Dear, dear !' in a still more perplexed voice ; ' a young lady at this time of night—why, it must be half after nine ! Very well, Mr. Dancy ; beg her to come in and sit in your parlour a moment, and I will be down.'

But Phillis absolutely refused to comply with the invitation.

' I am not tired, and I am not a bit wet,

and I like watching the rain. This is a nice little porch, and I have taken refuge here before. We all know Mrs. Williams very well.'

'She is a good creature, if she were not always in a bustle,' returned Mr. Dancy. 'There, the lamp is lighted—that looks more comfortable;' and as he spoke he came out into the little hall.

Phillis stole a curious glance at him.

He was a tall man, and was dressed somewhat strangely. A long foreign-looking cloak and a broad-brimmed felt hat, which he had not yet removed, gave him the look of an artist; but except that he had a beard and moustache, and wore blue spectacles, she could not gain the slightest clue to his features. But his voice—it pleased Phillis's sensitive ear more every moment; it was pleasant—rather foreign, too, and had a sad ring in it.

He leant against the wall opposite to her, and looked out thoughtfully at the driving rain.

'I think I saw you coming out from the White House,' he observed presently; 'are

you a friend of Mrs. Cheyne? I hope,' hesitating a little, 'that she is very well.'

'Do you know her?' asked Phillis in surprise.

'That is a very Irish way of answering my question; but you shall have your turn first. Yes; I used to know her many years ago, and Herbert Cheyne, too.'

'Her poor husband! Oh! and did you like him?' rather breathlessly.

'Pretty fairly,' was the indifferent reply. 'People used to call him a pleasant fellow, but I never thought much of him myself—not but what he was more sinned against than sinning, poor devil. Anyhow, he paid dearly enough for his faults.'

'Yes, indeed; and one must speak leniently of the dead.'

'Ah, that is what they say—that he is dead. I suppose his widow put on mourning and made lamentation. She is well, you say, and cheerful?'

'Oh no! neither one nor the other. I am not her friend. I only know her just a little, but she strikes me as very sad. She has lost her children, and——'

‘Ah!’ Phillis thought she heard a strange sound, almost like a groan, but, of course, it was fancy; and, just then, good Mrs. Williams came bustling downstairs.

‘Dear heart! why, if it is not Miss Chaloner! To think of you, my dear miss, being out so late, and alone! Oh, whatever will your ma say?’

‘My mother will scold me, of course,’ returned Phillis, laughing; ‘but you must not scold me too, Mrs. Williams, though I deserve all I get. Miss Mewlstone sent Evans with me, but I made him go back. Country girls are fearless, and it is only just a step to the Friary.’

‘The rain is stopping now, if you will permit me to escort you. Mrs. Williams will be the voucher for my respectability,’ observed Mr. Dancy, very gravely and without a smile; and, as Phillis seemed inclined to put him off with an excuse, he continued, more seriously: ‘Pardon me, but it is far too late, and the road far too lonely, for a young lady to go unattended. If you prefer it, I will go to the White House and bring out the recreant Evans by force.’

‘ Oh no ; there is no need for that,’ observed Phillis hastily ; and Mrs. Williams interposed volubly :

‘ Goodness sakes, Miss Challoner, you have no call to be afraid of Mr. Dancy ! Why, Mr. Frank Blunt, that nice young gentleman who lodged with me ever so many years, recommended him to me as one of his best and oldest friends. Your ma knew Mr. Blunt, for he was here with her, and a nicer-spoken young gentleman she said she never saw.’

‘ That will do, Mrs. Williams,’ returned Mr. Dancy, in rather a peremptory tone ; and then, turning to Phillis, he said, more civilly, but still a little abruptly, as though he were displeased :

‘ Well, Miss Challoner, do you feel inclined to trust yourself with me for the few hundred yards, or shall I fetch Evans ?’ and Phillis, feeling herself rebuked, unfurled her umbrella at once, and bade Mrs. Williams good-night by way of answer.



CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. WILLIAMS'S LODGER.

PHILLIS felt rather shy and uncomfortable as she picked her way warily among the rain-pools in the semi-darkness. Her companion was inclined to be silent. Most likely he considered her churlish in repelling his civil offers of help; so to make amends and set herself at her ease, she began to talk to him with an attempt at her old sprightliness.

‘Do you know this neighbourhood well, Mr. Dancy? Have you been long at Ivy Cottage?’

‘Only a few days; but I know the place well enough,’ he responded quietly. ‘It depends upon circumstances how long I remain here.’

‘Hadleigh is very quiet,’ returned Phillis

quickly. 'It does not offer many attractions to strangers, unless they have very moderate views of enjoyment. It is select, and the bathing is good, and the country tolerable; but when you have said that, you have said all in its favour.'

'I have always liked the place,' with a checked sigh. 'Quiet—that is what I want, and rest also. I have been rather a wanderer over the face of the earth, and one wants a little breathing time occasionally, to recruit one's exhausted energies. I like Ivy Cottage, and I like Mrs. Williams—both suit me for the present. Are you a visitor to Hadleigh—a mere bird of passage like myself, Miss Challoner?'

'Oh dear no; we have come here to live.'

'And—and you are intimate with Mrs. Cheyne?' coming a little closer to her side in the darkness.

'Nothing of the kind,' retorted Phillis; 'we are mere acquaintances. I do not feel to know her at all; she is not a person with whom one could get intimate all at once; she is a little difficult; besides, in our position——' And here she pulled herself up suddenly.

‘Pardon me,’ returned Mr. Dancy, in an interested voice, ‘perhaps I have no right to inquire, but your words are a little mysterious. Why should you not be intimate with Mrs. Cheyne?’

Phillis grew hot in the darkness. What right had he, a perfect stranger, to question her so closely? And yet if he were interested in his old friends, perhaps he meant to call at the White House, and then he would hear all about them; and after all, perfect frankness always answered best in the long run. Phillis hesitated so long over her rejoinder, that Mr. Dancy said, rather apologetically:

‘I see, I have been incautious; but you must not attribute my question to impertinent curiosity. I am anxious to learn all I can about a very old friend, of whom I have long lost sight, and I hoped that you might have been able to satisfy me.’

‘Miss Middleton would tell you far more than I.’

‘What, Elizabeth Middleton? Oh no, she is far too much of a saint for me.’

‘You know her, too!’ exclaimed Phillis in surprise. ‘No, I do not think you are curious,

Mr. Dancy ; it was only a little awkward for me to tell you about our acquaintance with Mrs. Cheyne. My sister and I rendered her a trifling service, and she took a fancy to us, and wished to be friends ; but in our present position any close intimacy would be impossible, as we are only dressmakers.'

'Dressmakers !' it was impossible to describe the genuine astonishment, almost dismay, in Mr. Dancy's voice. 'Dressmakers—pardon me, Miss Challoner, but when one has seen and spoken to a lady like yourself, it is almost incredible.'

This put Phillis on her mettle at once, and in a moment she laid by all her reserve.

'You have been a traveller, Mr. Dancy, you must have seen strange things by this time ; it surely cannot be such a matter of surprise that when gentlepeople are poor they must work for their bread ; when one has ten clever fingers, it is better to use them than to starve. I am not ashamed of my position—my sisters and I are very independent, but as we do not like to cause other people embarrassment, we prefer to lead hermit lives.'

Phillis's silvery tones were rather fierce, but it was well that she did not see her companion's expression of suppressed amusement; there was a little smothered laugh too that was turned into a cough.

'Are your sisters young like yourself?' he asked, rather abruptly.

'Oh yes, we are all much of an age!'

'And you have parents?'

'Only one parent,' she corrected, 'a mother. Ah, here we are at the Friary! Many thanks for your escort, Mr. Dancy.'

'Many thanks for allowing me to escort you,' he returned pointedly; 'after what you have told me, I esteem it an honour, Miss Challoner. No, you have no need to be ashamed of your position; I wish more English ladies would follow such a noble example—good-night! I trust we shall meet again;' and lifting his felt hat he withdrew, just as Nan appeared on the threshold, holding a lamp in her hand.

'You naughty girl, what has kept you so late?' she asked, as Phillis came slowly and meditatively up the flagged path.

'Hush, Nannie! Have they all gone to

bed? Let me come into your room and talk to you. Oh, I have had such an evening! And thereupon she poured into her sister's astonished ears the recital of her adventure—the storm—the figure in the shrubbery—the scene in the west corridor—the porch at Ivy Cottage, and the arrival of Mrs. Williams's mysterious lodger.

‘Oh, Phillis, I shall never trust you out of my sight again! How can you be so reckless—so incautious? Mother would be dreadfully shocked if she knew it.’

‘Mother must not know a single word—promise, Nan. You know how nervous she is. I will tell her, if you like, that I took refuge from the rain in Mrs. Williams's porch, and that her lodger walked home with me; but I think it would be better to suppress the scene at the White House.’

Nan thought over this a moment, and then she agreed.

‘It would make mother feel uneasy and timid in Mrs. Cheyne's presence,’ she observed. ‘She never likes these sort of hysterical attacks. We could not make her understand. Poor thing! I hope she is

asleep by this time. Shall you go to-morrow, Phil, and ask after her ?'

Phillis made a wry face at this, and owned she had had enough adventures to last her for a long time. But she admitted, too, that she would be anxious to know how Mrs. Cheyne would be.

'Yes, I suppose I must go, and just ask after her,' she said, as she rose rather wearily and lighted her candle. 'There is not the least chance of my seeing her. Good-night, Nannie ! Don't let all this keep you awake ; but I do not expect to sleep a wink myself.'

Which dismal prophecy was not fulfilled, as Phillis dropped into a heavy slumber the moment her head touched the pillow.

But her dreams were hardly pleasant. She thought she was walking down the 'Ghost's Walk,' between the yews and cypresses, with Mr. Dancy ; and that in the darkest part he threw off his cloak and felt hat, and showed the grinning skull of a skeleton, while a bony arm tried to seize her. She woke moaning with fright, to find Dulce's long hair streaming over her face, and the birds singing

in the sweet breezy dawn ; after which she fell into a dreamless, refreshing sleep.

Phillis had to submit to rather a severe reproof from her mother, in return for her frankness. Mrs. Challoner's prudery was up in arms the moment she heard of Mrs. Williams's lodger.

‘ Mrs. Williams ought to have come with you herself ; but a strange man at that time of night—what would Mr. Drummond have said to you ? ’

‘ Whatever Mr. Drummond liked to say ! ’ returned Phillis pettishly, for this was stroking her already ruffled feelings decidedly the wrong way.

Phillis always turned captious whenever Mr. Drummond was mentioned ; but she subsided into meekness again when her mother fell to crying and bemoaning her hard fate, and her darlings' unprotected position.

‘ Oh, what would your dear father have said ? ’ she cried, in such utter misery of tone that Phillis began kissing her, and promising that she would never, never be out so late again ; and that on no account would she walk up the Braidwood Road in the evening

with a strange man, who wore an outlandish cloak and a felt hat that only wanted a feather to remind her of Guy Fawkes, only Guy Fawkes did not wear blue spectacles.

When Phillis had at last soothed her mother—always a lengthy process ; for Mrs. Challoner, like other sensitive and feeble natures, could only be quieted by much talk—she fell to her work in vigorous silence ; but, by a stroke of ill-luck, Mr. Drummond chose to make another pastoral visitation ; and, to her secret chagrin, her mother at once repeated the whole story.

‘Mrs. Williams’s lodger saw Miss Phillis home ! Why, I did not know Mrs. Williams had a lodger !’ returned Mr. Drummond, in a perplexed voice.

This made matters worse.

‘I suppose Mrs. Williams is not bound to let the Vicarage know directly she lets her rooms ?’ observed Phillis, rather impatiently ; for she was vexed with her mother for repeating all this.

‘No, of course not ; but I was at Ivy Cottage myself yesterday, and Mrs. Williams knows I always call on her lodgers, and she

never mentioned the fellow's existence to me.'

'Fellow, indeed!' observed Phillis, *sotto voce*; for she had a vivid remembrance of the stranger's commanding presence and pleasant voice.

'When did he come?' inquired the young Vicar curiously. 'He must keep himself pretty close by daylight; for I have passed and repassed Ivy Cottage at least half a dozen times a day, and have never caught a glimpse of any one,' to which Phillis replied reluctantly that he had not been there many days—that he wanted rest and quiet, and was most likely an invalid.

'And his name is Dancy—you say?'

Phillis bowed. She was far too much taken up in her work to volunteer unnecessary words; and all this maternal fuss and fidget was odious to her.

'Then I will go and call upon him this very afternoon,' returned Archie, with cheerful alacrity. He had no idea that his curiosity on the subject was disagreeable to the girl; so he and Mrs. Challoner discussed the matter fully, and at some length. 'I

don't like the description of your mysterious stranger, Miss Challoner,' he said, laughing, as he stood up to take his leave. 'When novelists want to paint a villain, they generally bring in a long cloak and beard, and sometimes a disguising pair of blue spectacles. Well, I will catch him by daylight, and see what I can make of him.'

'You may disguise a face, but you cannot disguise a voice,' returned Phillis bluntly. 'I do not want to see Mr. Dancy to know he is a gentleman and a true man;' and this speech, that piqued Archie, though he did not know why, made him all the more bent on calling on Mrs. Williams's lodger.

But Mr. Drummond's curiosity was destined to be baffled. Mrs. Williams turned very red when she heard the Vicar's inquiries.

'You never told me you had let your rooms,' he said reproachfully; 'and yet you know I always make a practice of calling on your lodgers.'

'Deed! and it is very kind and thoughtful of you, too,' returned the good woman, dropping an old-fashioned curtsy; 'and me that prizes my clergyman's visits, and think

no end of them ! But Mr. Dancy—he says to me, “ Now, my good Mrs. Williams, I have come here for quiet—for absolute quiet ; and I do not want to see or hear of any one. Tell no tales about me, and leave me in peace ; and then we shall get on together.” And it was more than I ventured to give you the hint—hearing him speak so positive ; for he is a bit masterful, and no mistake.’

‘ Well, never mind, a clergyman never intrudes, and I will thank you to take Mr. Dancy my card,’ returned Archie impatiently ; but his look of assurance soon faded, when Mrs. Williams returned with her lodger’s compliments, and he was very much obliged to Mr. Drummond for his civility, but he did not wish to receive visitors.

Phillis was a little contrary all the remainder of the day ; she was not exactly cross—all the Challoners were sweet-tempered—but nothing quite suited her. Mrs. Challoner had proposed going that evening into the town with her youngest daughter to execute some commissions.

Just before they started, Phillis observed rather shortly that she should call at the

White House to make inquiries after Mrs. Cheyne, and that she would come back to the Friary to fetch Nan for a country walk. 'I do not appear in half an hour, you must come in search of me,' finished Phillis, with a naughty curl of her lip, to which Nan with admirable tact returned no answer, but all the same she fully intended to carry out the injunction; for Nan had imbibed her mother's simple old-fashioned notions, and a lurking dislike of Mrs. Williams's lodger had already entered her mind.

As Phillis did not enjoy her errand, she put on the best face she could, and hurried down the Braidwood Road as though her feet were winged like a female Mercury; and Mr. Dancy, who happened to be looking over the wire blind in the little parlour, much admired the girl's free swift gait as she sped down the avenue. Evans, the young footman, admitted her, and conducted her at once to the drawing-room; and great was Phillis's surprise and discomposure when she saw Mrs. Cheyne sitting alone reading by one of the windows, with her greyhounds grouped round her.

She started slightly at the announcement of Phillis's name, and as she came forward to greet her, a dark flush crossed her face for a moment; and then her features settled into their usual impassive calm, only there was marked coldness in her voice.

'Good-evening, Miss Challoner; you have chosen a fine evening for your visit. Let me beg of you never again to venture to the White House in such a storm.'

Phillis stammered out something about hoping that she was better, but she interrupted her almost abruptly:

'Much better, thank you. I am afraid you found me decidedly strange yesterday. I had what people call a nervous attack—electricity in the air; a brooding storm brings it on. It is a pity one should be so childish as to dread thunder; but we are oddly constituted, some of us.' She shrugged her shoulders, as though to dismiss the subject, and stroked the head of the greyhound that lay at her feet.

Poor Phillis found her position decidedly embarrassing. To be sure, Miss Mewlstone had warned her of the reception that she

might expect ; but all the same she found it very unpleasant. She must not abridge her visit so much as to excite suspicion ; and yet it seemed impossible to carry on a comfortable conversation with Mrs. Cheyne in this freezing mood, and as Phillis could think of nothing to say, she asked after Miss Mewlstone.

‘Oh, she was very well,’ Mrs. Cheyne answered indifferently. ‘Nothing ever ailed Barby ; she was one of those easy-going people who took life as she found it, without fuss and grumbling.

‘I think she is very nice and sympathetic,’ hazarded Phillis.

‘Oh yes ; Miss Mewlstone has a feeling heart,’ returned Mrs. Cheyne ; but she said it in a sarcastic voice. ‘We have all our special endowments. Miss Mewlstone is made by nature to be a moral feather-bed, to break other people’s awkward tumbles. She hinders broken bones, and interposes a soft surface of sympathy between unlucky folks. There is not much in common between us, but, all the same, old Barby is a sort of necessity to me. We are a droll household at the White House, Miss Challoner, are we not ? Barby

and the greyhounds and I!—oh, quite a happy family!’ and she gave a short laugh, very much the reverse of merriment.

Phillis began to feel it was time to go.

‘Well, how does the dressmaking progress?’ asked her hostess suddenly. ‘Miss Middleton tells me the Challoner fit is quite the rage in Hadleigh.’

‘We have more orders than we can execute,’ returned Phillis curtly.

‘Humph! that sounds promising. I hope your mother is careful of you, and forbids any expenditure of midnight oil, or you will be reduced to a thread-paper. As I have told you, you are not the same girl that you were when you came to the relief of my injured ankle.’

‘I feel tolerably substantial, thank you,’ returned Phillis ungraciously, for, in common with other girls, she hated to be pitied for her looks, and she had a notion Mrs. Cheyne only said this to plague her. ‘Nan is our head and task-mistress. We lead regular lives—have stated hours for work, take plenty of exercise, and, on the whole, are doing as well as possible.’

‘There speaks the Challoner spirit.’

‘Oh yes; that never fails us. But now Nan will be waiting for me, and I only called just to inquire after you.’

‘And you did not expect to see me. Well, come again when I am in a better humour for conversation. If you stay longer now I might not be sparing of my sarcasms. By-the-bye, what has become of our young vicar? Tell him he has not converted me yet, and I quite miss his pastoral visits. Do you know,’ looking so keenly at Phillis that she blushed with annoyance, ‘a little bird tells me that our pastor has undertaken the supervision of the Friary. Which is it, my dear, that he is trying to convert?’

The tone and manner were intolerable to Phillis.

‘I don’t understand you, Mrs. Cheyne,’ she returned, with superb youthful haughtiness. ‘Mr. Drummond is a kind neighbour, and so is Miss Mattie. You may keep these insinuations for him, if you will.’ Then she would have escaped without another glance at her tormentor, but Mrs. Cheyne detained her.

‘There, never mind. I will take back my

naughty speech. It was rude and impertinent of me, I know that. But I like you all the better for your spirit; and, my dear, take care of yourself and your pretty sisters, for he is not worthy of one of you.'

'Oh, Mrs. Cheyne! for shame!' and Phillis's gray eyes sparkled with lively indignation.

'He is a very ordinary good young man; and you and your sisters are real metal, and worth your weight in gold. There, go away, child; and come and see me again, for it does me good to torment you!' and the singular woman drew the girl into her arms suddenly and kissed her forehead, and then pushed her away. 'To-morrow or the next day, but not to-night,' she said hurriedly. 'I should make you cross fifty times if you stayed longer to-night.' And Phillis was too thankful to be released to linger any longer; but her cheeks were burning as she walked down the avenue.

'Why do people always put these things into girls' heads?' she said to herself. 'A young man cannot come into the house—cannot say pleasant words, or do kind neigh-

hourly actions, but one must at once attribute these sort of motives. I have not been free from blame myself in this matter, for I have feared more than once that Nan's sweet face attracted him—poor Mr. Drummond! I hope not, for he would not have a chance against Dick. I wonder if I ought to say a word—if it would be premature or unnecessary? But I should hate him to be unhappy'—here Phillis sighed, and then threw up her head proudly; 'I might say just a word—mentioning Dick—for he does not know of his existence. I wonder if he would take the hint. I could do it very cleverly, I know. I hate to see people burning their fingers for nothing—I always want to go to their rescue. He is tiresome, but he is very nice. And, heigh-ho! what a crooked world we live in!—nothing goes quite straight in it.' And Phillis sighed again.

'Miss Challoner!' The voice sounded so near her that Phillis gave a great start. She had nearly reached the gate, and there was Mr. Dancy walking beside her, just as though he had emerged from the ground; and yet Phillis had not heard a sound. 'Have I startled

you?' he continued gravely. 'You were in such a brown study that I had to call you by your name to rouse you. There is nothing wrong at the White House, I hope?'

'Oh no! Mrs. Cheyne is better—her nervous attack has quite passed off.'

'Magdalene suffering from a nervous attack?' and then Mr. Dancy stopped, and bit his lip. 'Excuse me, I knew her before she was married, when she was Magdalene Davenport—before she and poor Herbert Cheyne unfortunately came together. I doubt whether things have not happened for the best—there—I mean,' as Phillis looked at him in some perplexity, 'that there is little fear of her being an inconsolable widow.'

'How can you say such a thing!' returned Phillis indignantly. 'That is the way with you men—you judge so harshly of women. Mrs. Cheyne is singular in her ways. She wears no mourning, and yet a more unhappy creature never existed on this earth. Not inconsolable!—and yet no one dares to speak a word of comfort to her, so great is her misery.'

'Excuse me one moment—I have been ill,

and am still subject to fits of giddiness. A mere vertigo—nothing more.' But he said the words gasping for breath, and looked so deadly pale that Phillis felt quite frightened as she stood beside him.

They had been walking a few steps down the Braidwood Road, and Phillis had looked out anxiously for Nan, who had not yet appeared in sight. But now Mr. Dancy had come to an abrupt pause, and was leaning for support against the low wall that shut in the grounds of the White House. Phillis looked at him a little curiously, in spite of her sympathy. He still wore his loose cloak, though the evening was warm; but he had loosened it, and taken off his felt hat for air.

In figure he was a tall, powerful-looking man, only thin and almost emaciated, as though from recent illness. His features were handsome, but singularly bronzed and weather-beaten, as though from constant exposure to sun and wind; and even the blue spectacles could not hide a pair of keen blue eyes. By daylight Phillis could see his brown beard and moustaches were tinged with gray, and

the hair on the temples was almost white; and yet he seemed still in the prime of life. It was a far handsomer face than Archie Drummond's; but the deep lines and gray hair spoke of trouble more than age, and one thing especially impressed Phillis—the face was as refined as the voice.

If Mr. Dancy were aware of her close scrutiny he took no notice of it. He leant his arm against the wall, and rested his head against it; and the thin brown hand was plainly visible, with a deep red scar just above the wrist.

As Phillis regarded it with sudden horror, wondering what had inflicted it, he suddenly roused himself with an apology :

‘There! it has passed—it never lasts long. Shall we walk on? I am so ashamed of detaining you in this way; but when a man has had a sunstroke——’

‘Oh, that is sad!’ returned Phillis, in a sympathizing voice. ‘Is that why you keep indoors so much in the daylight? at least’—correcting herself in haste, for she had spoken without thought—‘one never sees you about,’ which was a foolish speech, and showed she

took notice of his movements ; but she could not betray Mr. Drummond.

‘Some one else only comes out in the evening,’ he rejoined, rather pointedly. ‘Who told you I kept indoors in the daylight? Oh, I know!’ the frown passing from his face, for he had spoken quickly, and in annoyed fashion. ‘This sounds like a parson’s prating ; I know the language of old. By-the-bye, did you set the clergy on my track?’ turning the blue spectacles full on the embarrassed Phillis.

‘I—no, indeed!’ and then she went on frankly: ‘Mr. Drummond was at our house, and he told us that he always called on Mrs. Williams’s lodgers.’

‘True, Miss Challoner ; but how did his reverence know Mrs. Williams had a lodger?’

This was awkward, but Phillis steered her way through the difficulty with her usual dexterity.

‘I mentioned to my mother that you were kind enough to see me home, and she repeated the fact to Mr. Drummond.’

‘Thank you, Miss Challoner ; now I understand. I wonder if your mother would be

very shocked if a stranger intruded upon her? but you and I must have some more conversation together, and I do not see how it is to be managed in accordance with what you ladies call *les convenances*.'

'My mother——' began Phillis demurely; and then she paused, and looked up at him in astonishment. 'What, Mr. Dancy! you purpose to call on my mother, and yet you refused Mr. Drummond's visit?' for the news of Archie's defeat had already reached the Friary through Miss Mattie.

Mr. Dancy seemed rather nonplussed at this, and then he laughed.

'Ah, you are shrewd, Miss Challoner; there is no deceiving you! I have seen Mr. Drummond pass and repass often enough; and—pardon me, if he be a friend—I thought from the cut of his coat that he was a prig, and I have a horror of clerical prigs.'

'He is not priggish in the least,' was Phillis's annoyed rejoinder.

'No? Well, appearances are sometimes deceptive; perhaps I was too hasty in my dread of being bored. But here comes your sister, I think—at least, I have seen you

together ; so I am leaving you in good hands ;' and, before Phillis could reply, he had lifted his hat and turned away, just as Nan, whose vigilant eyes were upon him, was hurrying to join her sister.

' Oh, Phillis, was that Mr. Dancy ?' she asked, in a reproachful voice, as she hurried up to her.

' Yes, Nannie ; it was Mr. Dancy,' returned Phillis composedly ; ' and I wish I could have introduced him to you, for I believe he is coming to call on mother.' And, when she had related this astounding piece of intelligence, she looked in Nan's face and laughed ; and, in high good-humour, proceeded to relate their conversation.





CHAPTER XIV.

‘NOW WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.’

ON E fine morning in September, Mr. Drummond was standing at the back of Milner's Library turning over the last new assortment of books from Mudie, when two gentlemen entered the shop.

Strangers were always interesting to Archie, and he criticized them under a twofold aspect—pastoral and social. In this way curiosity becomes a virtue, and a man with a mission is not without his interests in life. Hadleigh was Mr. Drummond's sheep-walk, where he shepherded his lambs, and looked after his black sheep, and tried to wash them white; or, in default of that, at least to make out that their fleece was not so sable after all:

so he now considered it his duty to leave off turning over the pages of a seductive-looking novel, and to inspect the strangers.

They were both dressed in tweed travelling costumes, and looked sunburnt, as though they had just returned from a walking-tour. The elder was a short wiry man, with a shrewd face and quizzical eyes ; and he asked in a sharp clipping voice, that was not free from accent, for the last number of the local paper, containing lists of inhabitants, visitors, etc.

Meanwhile, the younger man walked about the shop whistling softly to himself, as though he had a fund of cheerfulness on hand which must find vent somewhere. When he came opposite Archie, he took a brief survey of him in a careless good-humoured fashion ; and then turned on his heel, bestowing a very cursory glance on Miss Masham, who stood shaking her black ringlets after the fashion of shopwomen, and waiting to know the gentleman's pleasure.

No one would have called this young man very good-looking, unless such an one had a secret predilection for decidedly reddish hair and a sandy moustache ; but there was an air

of *bonhomie*, of frank kindness, of boyish fun and pleasantry, that attracted even strangers, and Archie looked after him with considerable interest.

‘Oxford cut, father and son—father looks rather a queer customer,’ thought Archie to himself.

‘Dick, come here!—why, where is that fellow?’ suddenly exclaimed the elder man, beginning to put on his eye-glasses very nervously.

‘Coming, father. All right—what is it?’ returned the imperturbable Dick. He was still whistling ‘Twickenham Ferry’ under his breath, as he came to the counter, and leant with both elbows upon it.

‘Good gracious, boy, what does this mean?’ went on the other, in an irritable perturbed voice; and he read a short advertisement, written in a neat ladylike hand: “‘Dress-making undertaken. Terms moderate, and all orders promptly executed. Apply to—the Misses Challoner, the Friary, Braidwood Road. Ladies waited upon at their own residences.’” What the’—he was about to add a stronger term, but, in deference to Miss

Milner substituted—'Dickens does this mean, Dick?'

The young man's reply was to snatch the paper out of his father's hand, and study it intently, with his elbows still on the counter, and the last bar of 'Twickenham Ferry' died away uncompleted on his lips; and if anyone could have seen his face, they would have remarked a curious redness spreading to his forehead.

'Nan's handwriting, by Jove!' he muttered, but still inaudibly; and then he stared at the paper, and his face grew redder.

'Well, Dick, can't you answer? What does this piece of tomfoolery mean—"Dress-making undertaken—ladies waited upon at their own residences"? Can there be two families of Challoner, and two Friaries? and why don't you speak and say something?'

'Because I know as little as yourself, father,' returned the young man, without lifting his head; and he surreptitiously conveyed the paper to his pocket. 'Perhaps this lady,' indicating Miss Milner, 'could inform us?'

'I beg your pardon,' observed a gentle-

manly voice near them ; and looking up, Dick found himself confronted by the young clergyman. 'I overheard your inquiries, and as I am acquainted with the ladies in question, I may be able to satisfy you.'

'I should be extremely obliged to you if you would do so, sir,' returned the elder man, with alacrity ; but Dick turned away rather ungraciously, and his cheerful face grew sullen.

'Confound him ! what does he mean by his interference ? Knows them, indeed ! such a handsome beggar, too—a prig, one can see that from the cut of his clothes and beard !' and again he planted his elbows on the counter, and began pulling his rough little stubbly moustache.

'If you are referring to a mother and three daughters who live in the Friary, and eke out a scanty income by taking in dressmaking, I am happy to say I know them well,' went on Archie. 'My sister and I visit at the cottage, and they attend my church ; and, as Miss Milner can tell you, they work hard enough all the six days of the week.'

'Indeed, Mr. Drummond, there are few that work harder !' broke in Miss Milner

volubly. 'Such pretty creatures, too, to earn their own living; and yet they have a bright word and a smile for everybody! Ever since Miss Phillis' (here Dick groaned) 'made that blue dress for Mrs. Trimmings—she is the butcher's wife, and a dressy woman, though not flashy, like Mrs. Squails—they have been quite the rage in Hadleigh. All the townspeople, and the resident gentry, and even the visitors, want their gowns made by the Miss Challoners. Their fit is perfect; and they have such taste. And——' but here the luckless Dick could bear no more.

'If you will excuse me, sir,' he said, addressing his bewildered father, 'I have left something particular at the hotel; I must just run and fetch it.'

Dick did not specify whether it was his handkerchief, or his cigar-case, or his purse, of which he stood so urgently in need; but before Mr. Mayne could remonstrate, he had gone out of the shop. He went as far as the door of the hotel, and there he seized on a passing waiter, and questioned him in a breathless manner. Having obtained his information, he set off at a walk that was

almost a run through the town, and down the Braidwood Road. The few foot-passengers that he met shrank out of the way of this young man; for he walked, looking neither to the right nor to the left, as though he saw nothing before him. And his eyes were gloomy, and he did not whistle; and the only words he said to himself were, 'Oh, Nan, never to have told me of this!' over and over again.

The gate of the Friary stood open; for a small boy had been washing the flags, and had left his pail, and had gone off to play marbles in the road with a younger brother. Dick, who understood the bearings of the case at once, shook his fist at the truant behind his back, and then turned in at the gate.

He peeped in at the hall-door first; but Dorothy was peeling potatoes in the kitchen, and would see him as he passed, so he skirted the little path under the yews. And if Dulce had been at her sewing-machine as usual, she would have seen him at once; but this morning the machine was silent.

A few steps farther he came to a full-stop, and his eyes began to glisten, and he pricked

up his ears after the manner of lovers ; for, through an open window just behind him, he could hear Nan's voice, sweet and musical, reading aloud to her sisters.

'Oh, the darling !' he murmured, and composed himself for a few moments' ecstasy, for no doubt she was reading Tennyson, or Barrett-Browning, or one of the poetry-books he had given her ; but he was a little disappointed when he found it was prose.

" "With regard to washing-dresses," read Nan, in her clear tones, "cottons, as a general thing, have another material made up with them ; the under-skirt may be of foulard or satin——"

'Oh, I dare say ! what nonsensical extravagance !' observed Phillis.

" "Or the bodice of surak, satin, cashmere, or llama, and the skirt of cotton . . . the skirts are nearly always made with single box-pleats, with a flat surface in the centre, and a flat band of trimming is often stitched on at about five inches from the edge of the flounce." I should say that would be sweetly pretty, dear ; we might try it for Mrs. Penlip's dress. And just listen to a little more.'

‘I shall do nothing of the kind,’ blurted out Dick. ‘Oh, Nan, Nan! how could you be such a traitor—washing-dresses indeed, and me left in ignorance!’ and there was Dick, his face glowing and indignant, standing in the window, with Laddie barking furiously at him, and his out-stretched hand nearly touching Nan.

Phillis and Dulce screamed with surprise, being young and easily excited; but Nan only said, ‘Oh, Dick!’ very faintly; and her sweet face grew red and pale by turns, and her fingers fluttered a little in his grasp, but only for joy and the sheer delight of seeing him.

As for Dick, his eyes shone, but his manner was masterful.

‘Look here!’ he said, drawing Nan’s advertisement from his pocket; ‘we had come down here to surprise you girls, and to have a little fun and tennis; and I meant to have treated you to the public ground at the hotel, as I knew you had only a scrubby little bit of lawn—and this is what has met my eyes this morning! You have deceived mother and me—you have let us enjoy our holiday,

which I didn't a bit, for I had a sort of nasty presentiment and a heap of uncomfortable thoughts ; and all the while you were slaving away at this hideous dressmaking—I wish I could burn the whole rag, tag, and bobtail—and never let us know you wanted anything. And you call that being friends !'

'Yes, and the best of friends too,' responded Phillis cheerfully, for Nan was too much crushed by all this eloquence to answer. 'Come along, Dulce ! don't listen any more to this nonsense, when you know mother is wanting us. Dick is all very well when he is in a good humour, but time and dress-making wait for no man ;' and the young hypocrite dragged the unwilling Dulce away. 'Can't you leave them alone to come to an understanding ?' whispered Phillis in her ear, when they got outside the door. 'I can see it in his eyes ; and Nan is on the verge of crying, she is so upset with the surprise. And you goose, where are you going now ?'

'To mother. Did you not say she wanted us ?'

'Oh, you silly child !' returned Phillis calmly ; 'does not mother always want us ?'

One must say what comes uppermost in one's mind in these sort of emergencies. But for me, you would have stood there for an hour staring at them. Mother is out, as it happens; if you like we will go and meet her. Oh no, I forgot—Dick is a young man, and it would not be proper. Let us go into the kitchen and help Dorothy;' and away they went.

'Phillis is a trump!' thought Dick, as he shut the door. 'I love that girl;' and then he marched up to Nan, and took her hands boldly.

'Now, Nan, you owe me amends for this; at least, you will say you are sorry.'

'No, Dick,' hanging her head, for she could not face his look. He was so masterful and determined with her, and so unlike the easy Dick of old. 'I am not a bit sorry—I would not have spoiled your holiday for worlds.'

'My holiday—a precious holiday it was without you! A lot of stupid climbing, with grinning idiots for company. Well, never mind that'—his wrathful tone changing in a moment. 'So you kept me in the dark just for my own good?'

'Yes, of course, Dick. What an unnecessary question !

'And you wanted me, Nan ?'

'Yes,' very faintly, and there was a little teardrop on one of Nan's lashes.

She had been so miserable—how miserable he would never know ; but he need not have asked her that.

'Oh, very well ; then I won't bother you with any more questions. Now we understand each other, and can just go to business.'

Nan looked up in his face in alarm. She anticipated another lecture, but nothing of the sort came. Dick cleared his throat, got a little red, and went on :

'I say settle our business, because we have been as good as engaged all these years. You know you belong to me, Nan ?'

'Yes, Dick,' she returned obediently ; for she was too much taken by surprise to know what she ought to say, and the two words escaped from her almost unconsciously.

'There never was a time we were not fond of each other—ever since you were so high,' pointing to what would represent the

height of an extremely dwarfish infant of seven or eight months.

‘Oh, not so long ago as that,’ returned Nan, laughing a little.

‘Quite as long,’ repeated Dick solemnly. ‘I declare I have been so fond of you all my life, Nan, that I have been the happiest fellow in the world. Now look here—just say after me, “Dick, I promise on my word and honour to marry you.”’

Nan repeated the words, and then she paused in affright.

‘But your father!’ she gasped—‘and the dressmaking! Oh, Dick! what have you made me say? You have startled me into forgetting everything. Oh dear! oh dear! what shall I do?’ continued Nan, in the most innocent way. ‘We shall be engaged all our lives, for he will never allow you to marry me. Dick, dear Dick, please let me off! I never meant to give in like this.’

‘Never mind what you meant to do,’ returned Dick, with the utmost gravity; ‘the thing is, you have done it. On your word and honour, Nan, remember. Now we are engaged.’

'Oh, but, Dick, please don't take such advantage of me, just because I said—or, at least, you said—I was fond of you. What will mother say? She will be so dreadfully shocked; and it is so cruel to your father. I will be engaged to you in a way. I will promise—I will vow, if you will—never to marry anyone else.'

'I should think not,' interrupted Dick fiercely. 'I would murder the fellow, whoever he was!' and, in spite of himself, his thought reverted to the fair beard and handsome face of the young clergyman.

Nan saw from his obstinate face that her eloquence was all wasted; but she made one more attempt, blushing like a rose.

'I will even promise to marry you, if your father gives his consent. You know, Dick, I would never go against him.'

'Nor I. You ought to know me better, Nan, than to think I should act shabbily, and leave the dear old fellow in the dark.'

'Then you will set me free,' marvelling a little over her lover's good sense and filial submission.

'As free as an engagement permits. Why,

what do you mean, Nan? Have I not just told you we are engaged for good and all? Do you suppose I do not mean to tell my father so on the first opportunity? There he comes! bless the man, I knew he would follow me! Now you shall see how I can stick up for the girl I love.' But Dick thought it better to release the hand he had been holding all this time.

There are certain moments in life when one is in too exalted a mood to feel the usual sensations that circumstances might warrant. At another time Nan would have been shocked at the condition of her work-room, being a tidy little soul, and thrifty as to pins and other odds and ends; and the thought of Mr. Mayne coming upon them unexpectedly would have frightened her out of her senses.

The room was certainly not in its usual order. There had been much business transacted there that morning. The table was strewn with breadths of gay *broché* silk; an unfinished gauzy-looking dress hung over a chair; the door of the wardrobe was open, and a row of dark-looking shapes—like Bluebeard's decapitated wives—were dimly

revealed to view. A sort of lay figure, draped in calico, was in one corner—as Nan observed to Phillis afterwards, 'There was not a tidy corner in the whole room.'

Nevertheless, the presence of Dick so glorified the place that Nan looked round at the chaos quite calmly, as she heard Mr. Mayne's sharp voice first inquiring for her mother, and then for herself. Dorothy, with her usual tact, would have shown him into the little parlour; but Nan, who wished for no disguise, stepped forward and threw open the door.

'I am here, Dorothy. Come in, Mr. Mayne. Dick is here too, and I am so sorry mother is out.'

'I might have known that scapegrace would have given me the slip!' muttered Mr. Mayne, as he shook hands ungraciously with Nan, and then followed her into the work-room.

Dick, who was examining the wardrobe, turned round and saluted his father with a condescending nod.

'You were too long with the parson—I could not wait, you see. Did you make all

these dresses, Nan? You are awfully clever, you girls! They look first-rate—this greeny-browny-yellowish one, for example;’ pulling out a much furbelowed garment destined for Mrs. Squails.

‘Oh, Dick, do please leave them alone!’ and Nan authoritatively waved him away, and closed the wardrobe.

‘I was only admiring your handiwork,’ returned Dick imperturbably. ‘Does she not look a charming little dressmaker, father?’ regarding Nan with undisguised pleasure, as she stood in her pretty bib-apron before them.

But Mr. Mayne only drew his heavy eyebrows together, and said:

‘Pshaw, Dick! don’t chatter such folly. I want to have some talk with Miss Nancy myself.’

‘All right—I have had my innings,’ returned naughty Dick; but he shot a look at Nan that made her blush to her finger-ends, and that was not lost on Mr. Mayne.

‘Well now, Miss Nancy, what does all this mean?’ he asked harshly. ‘Here we have run down just in a friendly way—Dick

and I—leaving the mother rather knocked up after her travels at Longmead, to look you up, and see how you are getting on. And now we find you have been deceiving us all along, and keeping us in the dark; and that you are making yourselves the talk of the place—sewing a parcel of gowns for all the townspeople.'

Mr. Mayne did not add that his son had so bothered him for the last three weeks to run down to Hadleigh, that he had acceded at last to his request in the hope of enjoying a little peace.

'Draw it mild!' muttered Dick, who did not much admire this opening tirade; but Nan answered, with much dignity:

'If people talk about us, it is because of the novelty. They have never heard of gentle-people doing this sort of work before——'

'I should think not!' wrathfully from Mr. Mayne.

'Things were so bad with us that we should have all had to separate if Phillis had not planned this scheme. And then mother would have broken her heart; but now we are getting on famously. Our work gives

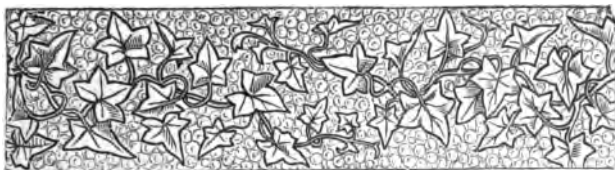
satisfaction—we have plenty of orders—we do not forfeit people's good opinions, for we have nothing but respect shown us, and——'

But here Mr. Mayne interrupted her flow of quiet eloquence somewhat rudely.

'Pack of nonsense!' he exclaimed angrily. 'I wonder at your mother—I do indeed. I thought she had more sense. You have no right to outrage your friends in this way—it is treating us badly. What will your mother say, Dick? She will be dreadfully shocked. I am sorry for you, my boy—I am indeed; but under the circumstances——'

But what he was about to add was checked by a very singular proceeding on the part of his son; for Dick suddenly took Nan's hand, and drew her forward.

'Don't be sorry for me, father; I am the happiest fellow alive. Nan and I have come to an understanding at last, after all these years. Allow me to present to you the future Mrs. Richard Mayne.'



CHAPTER XV.

DICK THINKS OF THE CITY.

WHEN Dick had uttered this audacious speech, Mr. Mayne started back, and his expression of mingled wrath and dismay was so ludicrous, that under any other circumstances his son would have found it difficult to keep his countenance.

‘What! what!’ he almost shouted, losing all sense of politeness, and even of Nan’s presence—‘you young fool, what do you mean by trumping up this nonsense, and presuming to talk to me in this way?’

Dick thought it prudent to drop Nan’s hand—and, indeed, the girl shrank away from them both in alarm at this outburst—nevertheless, his countenance and bearing main-

tained the same admirable *sang froid*, as he confronted his angry parent.

‘Now, father, what is the use of calling me names? When a fellow is of age, and knows his own mind, he does not care a pin for being called a fool. “Hard words break no bones,” as our copy-leaves used to tell us—no, I have not got that quite right; but that is about my meaning. Look here, father,’ he continued in a coaxing, boyish voice; ‘I have cared for Nan ever since she was a little creature so high,’ again reverting to the infantile measurement. ‘I have always meant to marry her—that is, if she would have me,’ correcting himself, as Nan drew herself up a little proudly. ‘Money or no money, there is not another girl in England that I would have for a wife. I would wait for her if I had to wait half my life, just the same as she would wait for me; and so, as I said before, when a fellow has made up his mind, there is nothing more to say;’ and here Dick pursed up his lips for a whistle, but thought better of it, and fell to twisting and untwisting the ends of his sandy moustache.

Nan’s downcast eyes revealed nothing. But

if Dick could only have seen the happy look in them! What eloquence could ever have been so dear to her as that clear rough-and-ready statement of her lover's feelings for her? 'There is not another girl in England that I would have for a wife.' Could anything surpass the beauty of that sentence? Oh, how manly, how true he was, this Dick of hers!

'Oh indeed! I am to say nothing, am I?' returned Mr. Mayne, with exquisite irony. 'My son is to dictate to me, and I am to be silent! Oh, you young fool!' he muttered again under his breath; but then for the moment words seemed to fail him.

In spite of the wrath that was boiling within him, and to which he did not dare give vent in Nan's presence; in spite of the grief and disappointment that his son's defiance had caused him, Dick's bearing filled him with admiration and amazement.

This boy of his was worth something, he thought. He had a clear head of his own, and could speak to some purpose. Was a likely young fellow like this to be thrown away on that Challoner girl? Poor Nan!

Pretty and blooming as she looked, Mr. Mayne felt almost as though he hated her. Why had she come between his boy and him? Had he a dozen sons, that he could spare one of them? Was not Dick his only one—the son of his right hand, his sole hope and ambition? Mr. Mayne could have wept as these thoughts passed through his mind.

It was at this moment that Nan thought it right to speak. Dick had had his say, but it was not for her to be silent.

‘Mr. Mayne, please listen to me a moment,’ she said pleadingly.

‘No; I must speak to your father,’ as Dick, much alarmed, tried to silence her. ‘He must not think hard things of us, and misunderstand us.’

‘No, dear; indeed, you had better be silent!’ implored Dick anxiously; but Nan for once turned a deaf ear to him.

‘I must speak,’ she persisted. ‘Mr. Mayne, it is quite true what Dick says; we have been together all our lives, and have grown to care for each other. I cannot remember the time’—the tears coming into her bright eyes—‘when Dick was not far more to

me than a brother; it is all of such long standing, it is far, far too late to stop it now.'

'We shall see about that, Miss Nancy,' muttered Mr. Mayne, between his teeth; but the girl did not seem to hear him.

'Dick took me by surprise just now. I ought to have been more on my guard, and not have given him that promise.'

'What promise?' demanded Mr. Mayne harshly; and Nan hung her head, and returned shyly:

'That I would marry him some time; but indeed—indeed he made me say it, and I was so taken by surprise. No, Dick; you must let me finish,' for Dick was looking at her with piteous entreaty in his eyes. 'I know we were wrong to say so much without your leave; but indeed I will do your son no harm. I cannot marry anyone else, because I am engaged to him; but as far as he is concerned, he is free. I will never marry him without your permission; he shall not come here if you do not wish—but do not be so angry with us;' and here her lip quivered. 'If you did not mean this to happen, you

should have kept us apart all these years.'

'Oh, hush, dear!' whispered Dick in her ear; but Mr. Mayne almost thrust him aside, and laid a rough grasp on the girl's wrist. 'Never mind him; answer me one question. Are you serious in what you say, that you will never marry him without my permission?'

'Of course not,' answered Nan, quite shocked. 'Dick would not ask me to do such a thing; he is far too honourable, and—and—no one would think of such a thing.'

'Very well, that is all I wanted to know;' and he released her, not over-gently: 'the rest I can settle with Master Dick himself. Good-morning, Miss Nancy; under the circumstances, I do not think I will wait to see your mother. I am not quite in the mood for ladies; perhaps, later on, I may have something to say to her.'

'Don't you mean to shake hands with me, Mr. Mayne?' asked poor Nan, much distressed at the evil temper of Dick's father; but there was no sign of softening.

'Yes; I will shake hands with you, and gladly, if you will promise to be sensible and

send this boy of mine about his business. Come now, Nan ; own for my comfort that it is only a bit of boy-and-girl nonsense, that means nothing. I am not over-particular, and do not object to a bit of flirting with young folk.'

'You had better go with your father, Dick,' returned Nan, with much dignity, and quite ignoring this speech.

Dick seized the little hand that had been so rudely rejected, and kissed it under his father's eyes.

'I will see you again somehow,' he whispered ; and Nan was quite content with this promise. Dick would keep his word, she knew ; he would not leave Hadleigh without seeing her.

A very unpleasant hour ensued for poor Dick. Mr. Mayne was in one of his worst tempers ; he had conducted himself to Nan in an ungentlemanly manner, and he knew it ; as Dick said to himself :

'It is very hard on a fellow when one's father acts like a cad.'

Mr. Mayne had shown himself a cad. No gentleman by birth or breeding would have

conducted himself in that offensive way. Bad temper had broken down the trammels of conventionality; never before in his life had Dick felt so utterly ashamed of his father. Mr. Mayne was conscious of his son's criticism, and it made things worse.

It spoke well for Dick's prudence and self-command, that he let the storm of his father's anger break over his head, and said no word. Mr. Mayne ranted and raved. I am afraid he even swore once or twice—at least his language was undesirably strong—and Dick walked beside him and held his peace. 'Poor old boy, he is terribly cut up about this!' he thought once.

Mr. Drummond saw them coming along, and wondered at the energy of the older man. Was it the visit to the Friary that had put him out? and then he fell anew into cogitation. Who were these people who were so curious about the Challoners? At least that sulky young fellow had taken no apparent interest, for he had made an excuse to leave them; but the other one had persisted in very close investigation. Perhaps he was some relation—an uncle, or distant cousin—

evidently he had some right or claim to be displeased. Archie determined to solve the mystery as soon as possible.

‘Well, sir, have you nothing to say for yourself?’ demanded Mr. Mayne, when he had fairly exhausted himself. He had disinherited Dick half a dozen times—he had deprived him of his liberal allowance—he had spoken of a projected voyage to New Zealand; and Dick had only walked on steadily, and thought of the cold trembling little hand he had kissed. ‘Have you nothing to say for yourself?’ he vociferated.

Dick woke up at this.

‘Oh yes, I have plenty to say,’ he returned cheerfully; ‘but two cannot talk at once, you know. It was right for you to have the first innings, and all that; and, I say, father’—his filial feelings coming to the surface—‘I am awfully sorry, and so is Nan, to see you so vexed.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ was the wrathful answer. ‘Don’t mention that girl’s name in my hearing for the present.’

‘Whose name — Nan’s?’ returned Dick innocently. ‘I don’t see how we are to keep

it out of the conversation, when the row is all about her. Look here, father—I say again I am awfully sorry you are vexed; but, as N— she says, it is too late to mend matters now. I have made my choice, for better for worse, and I am sorry it does not please you.'

'Please me!' retorted Mr. Mayne; and then he added venomously: 'The girl said you would not marry without my permission; but I will never give it. Come, Dick, it is no use thwarting me in this; you are our only child, and we have other plans for you. Pshaw! you are only a boy! You have not seen the world yet. There are dozens of girls far prettier than this Nan. Give this nonsense up, and there is nothing I will not do for you: you shall travel, have your liberty, do as you like for the next two or three years, and I will not worry you about marrying. Why, you are only one-and-twenty; and you have two more years of University life! What an idea—a fine young fellow like you talking of tying yourself down to matrimony!'

'There is no use in my going back to

Oxford, father,' returned Dick steadily; 'thank you kindly all the same, but it would be sheer waste of time and money. I have made up my mind to go into the City; it is the fashionable thing nowadays. And one does not need Greek and Latin for that, though, of course, it is an advantage to a fellow, and gives him a standing; but, as I have to get my own living, I cannot afford the two years. Your old chums Stanfield and Stanfield would give me a berth at once.'

'Is the boy mad? What on earth do you mean by all this tomfoolery?' demanded Mr. Mayne, unable to believe his ears. His small gray eyes opened widely and irately on his son; but Dick took no notice. He walked on, with his shoulders looking rather square and determined; the corners of his mouth were working rebelliously—evidently he did not dare to look at his father, for fear of breaking into incontrollable laughter. Really, the dear old boy was getting too absurd; he—Dick—could not stand it much longer. 'What in the name of all that is foolish do you mean, sir?' thundered Mr. Mayne.

Dick executed a low whistle, and then he said in an aggrieved voice :

‘ Well, father, I don’t call you very consistent. I suppose I know what being disinherited means ? In plain language, you have told me about half a dozen times that if I stick to Nan I am not to expect a shilling of your money. Now, in my own mind, of course I call that precious hard on a fellow, considering I have not been such a bad sort of son after all. But I am not going to quarrel with you about that ; a man has a right to do as he likes with his own money.’

‘ Yes ; but, Dick, you are going to be sensible, you know, and drop the girl ?’ in a wheedling sort of tone.

‘ Excuse me, father ; I am going to do nothing of the kind,’ returned Dick, with sudden firmness. ‘ I am going to stick to her, as you did to my mother ; and for just as long, if it must be so. I am not a bit afraid that you will not give your permission, if we only wait long enough to prove that we are in earnest. The only thing I am anxious about is how I am to get my living ; and that is why I will not consent to waste any more

time at the University. The Bar is too uphill work—money is made quickest in the City; so if you will be good enough to give me an introduction to Stanfield and Stanfield—I know they are a rattling good sort of people—that is all I will trouble you about at present;’ and Dick drew in a long breath of relief after this weighty speech.

‘Do you mean this, Dick?’ asked Mr. Mayne, rather feebly.

They had reached the hotel now, and as they entered the private room where their luncheon was awaiting them, he sat down as though he had grown suddenly old and tired, and rested his head on his hand, perhaps to hide the moisture that had gathered under his shaggy eyebrows.

‘Yes, father, I do,’ returned Dick; but he spoke very gently, and his hand touched his father’s shoulder caressingly. ‘Let me give you some wine; all this business has taken it out of you.’

‘Yes, I have had a blow, Dick—my only boy has given me a blow,’ returned Mr. Mayne pathetically; but as he took the wine his hand trembled.

‘I am awfully sorry,’ answered Dick penitently; ‘if there were anything else you had asked me but this—but I cannot give up Nan;’ and as he pronounced the name, Dick’s eyes shone with pride and tenderness. He was a soft-hearted affectionate young fellow, and this quarrel with his father was costing him a great deal of pain; in everything else he would have been submissive to his parents. But now he had a purpose and responsibility in his life; he had to be faithful to the girl whom he had won; he must think for her now as well as for himself. How sweet was this sense of dual existence, this unity of heart and aim!

Mr. Mayne fairly groaned as he read the expression on his son’s face. Dick’s youthful countenance was stamped with honest resolution. ‘I am going to stick to her as you did to my mother’—that was what he had said. If this were true, it was all over with Dick’s chances with the pretty little heiress—he would never look at her or her thirty thousand pounds; ‘but all the same he, Richard Mayne, would never consent to his son marrying a dressmaker. If she had only

not disgraced herself, if she had not brought this humiliation on them, he might have been brought to listen to their pleading in good time, and at his own pleasure; but now, never—never!’ he muttered, and set his teeth hard.

‘Dick,’ he said suddenly, for there had been utter silence for a space.

‘Yes, father.’

‘You have upset me very much, and made me very unhappy; but I wish you to say nothing to your mother, and we will talk about this again. Promise me one thing—that you will go back to Oxford at least until Christmas.’

‘What is the good of that, sir?’ asked his son dubiously.

‘What is the good of anything? for you have taken every bit of pleasure out of my life; but at least you can do as much as this for me.’

‘Oh yes, father, if you wish it!’ returned Dick, more cheerfully; ‘but all the same, I have fixed upon a City life.’

‘We will talk of that again,’ replied his father; ‘and, Dick, we go home to-morrow,

and unless you promise me not to come down to Hadleigh between this and Christmas, I shall be obliged to speak to Mrs. Challoner.'

'Oh, there is no need for that,' returned Dick sulkily.

'You give me your word?'

'Oh yes,' pushing aside his chair with a kick. 'It would be no use coming down to Hadleigh, for Nan would not speak to me. I know her too well for that. She has got such a conscience, you know. I shall write to her, but I do not know if she will answer my letters; but it does not matter—we shall both be true as steel. 'If you don't want me any more I think I will have a cigar on the beach, for this room is confoundedly hot;' and without waiting for permission, Dick strode off, still sulky, and fully aware that his father meant to follow him, for fear of his footsteps straying again down the Braidwood Road.



CHAPTER XVI.

‘DICK IS TO BE OUR REAL BROTHER.’

NEVER was a father more devoted to his son's company than Mr. Mayne was that day. Dick's cigar was hardly alight before his father had joined him. When Dick grew weary of throwing stones aimlessly at imaginary objects, and voted the beach slow, Mr. Mayne proposed a walk with alacrity. They dined together—not talking much, it is true, for Dick was still sulky, and his father tired and inclined to headache; but keeping up a show of conversation for the waiter's benefit. But when that functionary had retired, and the wine was on the table, Dick made no further effort to be agreeable; but placed himself in the window-seat and

stared moodily at the sea, while his father watched him and drank his wine in silence.

Mr. Mayne was fighting against drowsiness valiantly.

Dick knew this, and was waiting for an opportunity to make his escape.

‘Had we not better ring for lights and coffee?’ asked his father, as he felt the first ominous sensations stealing over him.

‘Not just yet. I feel rather disposed for a nap myself; and it is a shame to shut out the moonlight,’ returned that wicked Dick, calling up a fib to his aid, and closing his eyes as he spoke.

The bait took. In another five minutes Mr. Mayne was nodding in earnest, and Dick on tiptoe had just softly closed the door behind him, and was taking his straw hat from its peg.

Nan was walking up and down the little dark lawn, feeling restless and out of sorts after the agitation of the morning, when she heard a low whistle at the other side of the wall, and her heart felt suddenly as light as a feather.

Dick saw her white gown as she came

down the flagged path to the gate to let him in. The moonlight seemed to light it up with a sort of glory.

'You are a darling not to keep me waiting, for we have not a moment to lose,' he whispered, as she came up close to him. 'He is asleep now, but he will wake up as soon as he misses me. Have you expected me before, Nan? But indeed I have not been left to myself a moment.'

'Oh, I knew all about it, my poor Dick,' she answered, looking at him so softly. 'Phillis is reading to mother in the parlour, and Dulce is in the work-room. I have nowhere to ask you unless you come in and talk to them. But mother is too upset to see you, I am afraid.'

'Let us wait here,' returned Dick boldly. 'No one can hear what we say, and I must speak to you alone. No; I had better not see your mother to-night, and the girls would be in the way. Shall you be tired, dear, if you stand out here a moment talking to me? for I dare not wait long.'

'Oh no, I shall not be tired,' answered Nan gently. Tired, when she had her own

Dick near her—when she could speak to him—look at him!

‘All right; but it is my duty to look after you, now you belong to me,’ returned Dick proudly. ‘Whatever happens—however long we may be separated, you must remember that—that you belong to me—that you will have to account to me if you do not take care of yourself.’

Nan smiled happily at this, and then she said:

‘I have told mother all about it, and she is dreadfully distressed about your father’s anger. She cried so, and took his part, and said she did not wonder that he would not listen to us. He would feel it such a disgrace, his son wanting to marry a dress-maker. She made me unhappy, too, when she put it all before me in that way,’ and here Nan’s face paled perceptibly in the moonlight, ‘for she made me see how hard it is on him, and on your mother, too! Oh, Dick! don’t you think you ought to listen to them, and not have anything more to do with me?’

‘Nan, I am shocked at you!’

'But, Dick!'

'I tell you I am utterly shocked! You to say such a thing to my face, when we have been as good as engaged to each other all our lives! Who cares for the trumpery dressmaking? Not I!'

'But your father!' persisted Nan, but very faintly, for Dick's eyes were blazing with anger.

'Not another word! Nan, how dare you—after what you have promised this morning! Have I not been worried and badgered enough, without your turning on me in this way? If you won't marry me, you won't; but I shall be a bachelor all my life for your sake!' and Dick, who was so sore, poor fellow, that he was ready to quarrel with her out of the very fulness of his love, actually made a movement as though to leave her, only Nan caught him by the arm in quite a frightened way.

'Dick! dear Dick!'

'Well,' rather sullenly.

'Oh, don't leave me like this! It would break my heart! I did not mean to make you angry. I was only pleading with you

for your own good. Of course, I will keep my promise. Have I not been true to you all my life? Oh, Dick! how can you turn from me like this?' and Nan actually began to sob in earnest, only Dick's sweet temper returned in a moment at the sight of her distress, and he fell to comforting her with all his might; and after this things went on more smoothly.

He told her about his conversation with his father, and how he had planned a City life for himself; but here Nan timidly interposed.

'Would that not be a pity, when you had always meant to study for the Bar?'

'Not a bit of it,' was the confident answer. 'That was my father's wish, not mine. I don't mind telling you in confidence that I am not at all a shining light. I am afraid I am rather a duffer, and shall not make my mark in the world. I have always thought desk-work must be rather a bore; but, after all, with a good introduction, and a tolerable berth, one is pretty sure of getting on in the City. What I want is to make a little nest cosy for somebody, and as quick as possible—eh, Nan?'

'I do not mind waiting,' faltered Nan. But she felt at this moment no lover could have been so absolutely perfect as her Dick.

'Oh, that is what girls always say,' returned Dick, rather loftily. 'They are never in a hurry. They would wait seven—ten years—half a lifetime. But with us men it is different. I am not a bit afraid of you. I know you will stick to me like a brick, and all that; and father will come round when he sees we are in earnest. But all the same, I want to have you to myself as soon as possible. A fellow likes the feeling of working for his wife. I hate to think of these pretty fingers stitching away for other people. I want them to work for me—do you understand, Nan?' and Nan, of course, understood.

Dick, poor fellow! had not much time for his love-making; he and Nan had too much business to settle. Nan had to explain to him that her mother was of opinion that, under the present circumstances, nothing ought to be done to excite Mr. Mayne's wrath. Dick might write to her mother sometimes, just to let them know how he was

getting on; but between the young people themselves there must be no correspondence.

‘Mother says it will not be honourable, and that we are not properly engaged.’ And, though Dick combated this rather stoutly, he gave in at last; and agreed that, until the new year, he would not claim his rights, or infringe the sacred privacy of the Friary.

‘And now I must go,’ said Dick, with a great sigh; ‘and it is good-bye for months. Now I do not mean to ask your leave—for you are such a girl for scruples, and all that; and you might take it into your head to refuse me—so there!’

Dick’s words were mysterious; but he very soon made his meaning plain.

Nan said, ‘Oh, Dick!’ but made no further protest. After all, whatever Mr. Mayne and her mother said, they were engaged.

As Dick closed the little gate behind him, he was aware of a tall figure looming in the darkness.

‘Confound that parson! What does he mean by loafing about here?’ he thought, feeling something like a pugnacious bull-dog at the prospect of a possible rival. ‘I forgot

to ask Nan about him ; but I dare say he is after one of the other girls ;' but these reflections were nipped in the bud, as the short, sturdy form of Mr. Mayne was dimly visible in the road.

Dick chuckled softly ; he could not help it.

'All right, dear old boy,' he said to himself ; and then he stepped up briskly, and took his father's arm.

'Do you call this honourable, sir ?' began Mr. Mayne, in a most irascible voice.

'I call it very neat,' returned Dick cheerfully. 'My dear pater, everything is fair in love and war ; and if you will nap at unseasonable times—but that comes of early rising, as I have often told you.'

'Hold your tongue, sir !' was the violent rejoinder. 'It is a mean trick you have served me, and you know it. We will go back to-night ; nothing will induce me to sleep in this place. You are not to be trusted. You told me a downright lie. You were humbugging me, sir, with your naps.'

'I will plead guilty to a fib, if you like,' was Dick's careless answer. 'What a fuss you are making, father ! Did you never tell

one in your life? Now, what is the use of putting yourself out?—it is not good at your age, sir. What would my mother say? It might bring on apoplexy, after that port-wine.'

'Confound your impertinence!' rejoined Mr. Mayne angrily; but Dick patted his coat-sleeve pleasantly.

'There, that will do. I think you have relieved your feelings sufficiently. Now we will go to business. I have seen Nan, and told her all about it; and she has had it out with her mother. Mrs. Challoner will not hear of our writing to each other; and I am not to show my face at the Friary without your permission. There is no fibbing or want of honour there—Nan is not the girl to encourage a fellow to take liberties.'

'Oh, indeed!' sneered Mr. Mayne; but he listened attentively for all that. And his gloomy eyebrows relaxed in the darkness. The girl was not behaving so badly, after all.

'So we said good-bye,' continued Dick, keeping the latter part of the interview to himself; 'and in October I shall go back for

the term, as I promised. We can settle about the other things after Christmas.'

'Oh yes, we can talk about that by-and-by,' replied his father hastily; and then he waxed cheerful all at once, and called his son's attention to some new houses they were building. 'After all, Hadleigh is not such a bad little place,' he observed; 'and they gave us a very good dinner at the hotel. It is not everyone who can cook fish like that;' and then Dick knew that the storm had blown over for the present, and that his father intended to make himself pleasant, and ignore all troublesome topics.

Dick was a little tired when he went to bed; but, on the whole, he was not unhappy. It was quite true that the idea of a City life was repugnant to him, but the thought of Nan sweetened even that. Nothing else remained to him if his father chose to be disagreeable and withdraw his allowance, or threaten to cut him off with a shilling, as other fellows' fathers did in novels.

'It is uncommonly unpleasant, having to wage war with one's own father,' thought Dick, as he laid his sandy head on the pillow.

‘He is such an old trump, too, that it goes against the grain. But when it comes to his wanting to choose a wife for me, it is too much of a good thing—it is tyranny fit for the Middle Ages. Let him threaten if he likes. He will find I shall take his threats in earnest. After Christmas I will have it out with him again; and if he will not listen to reason, I will go up to Mr. James Stanfield myself, and then he will see that I mean what I say. Heigho! I am not such a lucky fellow as Hamilton always thinks me;’ and at this juncture of his sad cogitations Dick forgot all about it, and fell asleep.

Yes; Dick slept the sleep of the just. It was Mr. Drummond who was wakeful and uneasy that night. A vague sense of something wrong tormented him waking and sleeping.

Who was that sandy-headed young fellow who had been twice to the Friary that day? What business had he to be shutting the gate after him in that free-and-easy way at ten o’clock at night? He must find it out somehow—he must make an excuse for calling there, and put the question as indifferently as he could; but even when he made up his mind

to pursue this course, Archie felt just as restless as ever.

He made his way to the cottage as early as possible. Phillis, who was alone in the work-room, coloured a little as she saw him coming in at the gate. He came so often, he was so kind, so attentive to them all, and yet she had a dim doubt in her mind that troubled her at times. Was it for Nan's sake that he came? Could she speak and undeceive him before things went too far with him? Yes, when the opportunity offered, she thought she could speak, even though the speaking would be painful to her.

Mr. Drummond looked round the room with a disappointed air as he entered, and then he came up to Phillis.

'You are alone?' he said, with a regretful accent in his voice—at least Phillis fancied she detected it. 'How is that? are your sisters out, or busy?'

'Oh, we are always busy,' returned Phillis lightly; but curiously enough she felt a little sore at his tone. 'Nan has gone down to Albert Terrace to take a fresh order, and Dulce is in the town somewhere with mother.'

Don't you mean to sit down, Mr. Drummond ? or is your business with mother ? She will not be back just yet, but I could give her any message.' Phillis said this as she stitched away with energy ; but one quick glance had shown her that Mr. Drummond was looking irresolute and ill at ease as he stood beside her.

'Thank you, but I must not stay and hinder you. Yes, my business was with your mother ; but it is of no consequence, and I can call again.' Nevertheless, he sat down and deposited his felt hat awkwardly enough on the table. He liked Phillis, but he was a little afraid of her ; she was shrewd, and seemed to have the knack of reading one's thoughts. He was wondering how he should bring his question on the tapis ; but Phillis, by some marvellous intuition that really surprised her, had already come to the conclusion that this visit meant something. He had seen Dick—perhaps he wanted to find out all about him. Certainly he was not quite himself to-day. Yes, that must be what he wanted. Phillis's kind heart and mother-wit were always ready for an emergency.

'How full Hadleigh is getting,' she

remarked pleasantly, as she adjusted the trimming of a sleeve. 'Do you know some old neighbours of ours from Oldfield turned up unexpectedly yesterday? They are going away to-day, though,' she added, with a little regret in her voice.

Archie brightened up visibly at this.

'Oh, indeed!' he observed with alacrity. 'Not a very long visit; perhaps they came down purposely to see you.'

'Yes, of course,' returned Phillis confusedly. 'They had intended staying some days at the hotel, but Mr. Mayne suddenly changed his mind, much to our and Dick's disappointment; but it could not be helped.'

'Dick,' echoed Archie, a little surprised at this familiarity; and then he added somewhat awkwardly: 'I think I saw the young man and his father at the library yesterday; and last night as I was coming from the station I encountered him again at your gate.'

'Yes, that was Dick,' answered Phillis, stooping a little over her work. 'He is not handsome, poor fellow! but he is as nice as possible. They live at Longmead; that is next door to our dear old Glen Cottage, and

the gardens adjoined. We call him Dick because we have known him all our lives, and he has been a sort of brother to us.'

'Oh yes, I see,' drawled Archie slowly. 'That sort of thing is very nice when you have not a man belonging to you. It is a little awkward sometimes, for people do not always see this sort of relationship. He seemed a nice sort of fellow, I should say,' he continued, in his patronizing way, stroking his beard complacently. After all, the sandy-headed youth was no possible rival.

'Oh, Dick is ever so nice,' answered Phillis enthusiastically; 'not good enough for——' and then she stopped and broke her thread. 'I am glad we are so fond of him,' she continued, rather hurriedly, 'because Dick is to be our real brother some day. He and Nan have cared for each other all their lives, and, though Mr. Mayne is dreadfully angry about it, they consider themselves as good as engaged, and mean to live down his opposition. They came to an understanding yesterday,' finished Phillis, who was determined to bring it all out.

'Oh, indeed,' returned Archie; 'that must

be a great relief, I am sure. There is your little dog whining at the door—may I let him in?' and, without waiting for an answer, Archie had darted out in pursuit of Laddie, but not before Phillis's swift upward glance had shown her a face that had grown perceptibly paler in the last few minutes.

'Oh, poor fellow! I was right!' thought Phillis, and the tears rushed to her eyes. 'It was best to speak. I see that now; and he will get over it if he thinks no one knows it. How I wish I could help him! but it will never do to show the least sympathy. I have no right;' and here Phillis sighed, and her gray eyes grew dark with pain for a moment. Archie was rather a long time absent; and then he came back with Laddie in his arms, and stood by the window.

'Your news has interested me very much,' he said, and his voice was quite steady. 'I suppose, as this—this engagement is not public, I had better not wish your sister joy, unless you do it for me.'

'Oh no; there is no need of that,' returned Phillis, in a low voice. 'Mother might not like my mentioning it; but I

thought you might wonder about Dick, and——' here Phillis got confused.

'Thank you,' replied Archie quietly; but now he looked at her. 'You are very kind. Yes, it was best for me to know;' and then, as Phillis rose and gave him her hand, for he had taken up his hat as he spoke, she read at once that her caution had been in vain—that he had full understanding why the news had been told to him, and him only, and that he was grateful to her for so telling him.

Poor Phillis! she had accomplished her task; and yet, as the door closed behind the young clergyman, two or three tears fell on her work. He was not angry with her; on the contrary, he had thanked her, and the grasp of his hand had been as cordial as ever. But, in spite of the steadiness of his voice and look, the arrow had pierced between the joints of his armour. He might not be fatally wounded—that was not in the girl's power to know; but that he was in some way hurt—made miserable with a man's misery—of this she was acutely sensible; and the strangest longing to comfort him—to tell him how much she admired his fortitude

—came over her, with a strong stinging pain that surprised her.

Archie had the longest walk that day that he had ever had in his life. He came in quite fagged and foot-sore to his dinner, and far too tired to eat. Mattie told him he looked ill and worn-out; but, though he generally resented any such personal remarks, he merely told her very gently that he was tired, and that he would like a cup of coffee in his study, and not to be disturbed. And when she took in the coffee presently, she found him buried in the depths of his easy-chair, and evidently half asleep, and stole out of the room on tiptoe.

But his eyes opened very speedily as soon as the door closed upon her. It was not sleep he wanted, but some moral strength to bear a pain that threatened to be unendurable. How had that girl read his secret? Surely he had not betrayed himself! Nan had not discovered it, for her calmness and sweet unconsciousness had never varied in his presence. Never for an instant had her changing colour testified to the faintest uneasiness. He understood the reason of her reserve now.

Her thoughts had been with this Dick ; and here Archie groaned and hid his face.

Not mortally hurt, perhaps ; but still the pain and the sense of loss were very bitter to this young man, who had felt for weeks past that his life was permeated by the sweetness and graciousness of Nan's presence. How lovely she had seemed to him—the ideal girl of his dreams ! It was love at first sight. He knew that now. His man's heart had been set on the hope of winning her, and now she was lost to him. Never for one moment had she belonged to him, or could belong to him. ' He and Nan have cared for each other all their lives '—that is what her sister had told him ; and what remained but for him to stamp out this craze and fever before it mastered him and robbed him of his peace ?

' I am not the only man who has had to suffer,' thought Archie, as hours after he stumbled up to bed in the darkness. ' At least, it makes it easier to know that no one shares my pain. These things are better battled out alone. I could not bear even Grace's sympathy in this.' And yet, as

Archie said this to himself, he recalled without any bitterness the half-tender, half-pitying look in Phillis's eyes. 'She was sorry for me. She saw it all; and it was kind of her to tell me,' thought the young man.

He had no idea that Phillis was at that moment whispering little wistful prayers in the darkness that he might soon be comforted.

Who knows how many such prayers are flung out into the deep of God's mercy—comfort for such an one whom we would fain comfort ourselves; feeble utterances and cries of pity; the stretching out of helpless hands, which nevertheless may bring down blessings! But so it shall be while men and women struggle and fall, and weep the tears common to humanity, 'until all eyes are dried in the clear light of eternity, and the sorest heart shall then own the wisdom of the cross that had been laid upon them.'

END OF VOL. II.



